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Editorial

Why do Theology?

It is very significant that recently there has been an abundance of books and articles on the validity of theology and theologization. To read them was to discover a new trend as well as to confirm what I wrote in the editorial of the last issue of ERT, namely, that 'theology is now in disrepute as never before'. The articles in this issue deal with this theme of theology and its validity. On account of this, we regret that the usual format and the inclusion of Book Reviews was not possible, and we hope the new format appeals to our readers.

Apparently, it is necessary to develop a fresh justification of theology in our time in the face of a variety of accusations against it, such as that theology divides; that it dampens one's spiritual fervour, dims missionary vision, deadens the sermon and ages the Church; that it is intellectual, is alienated from life, kills activity; that it raises more questions in the student's mind than it answers; that theologians are more judgmental and Pharisaic, and so on.

One can substantiate such a trend from several angles. An evaluation of Third World Evangelical Theologians meeting in 1982 at Seoul, Korea under the auspices of the Theological Commission affirms that the key questions there were concerning the nature of theology and of the spirit. Tite Tienou's recent critique of theologization in Africa (we hope to publish this penetrating paper in our next issue) touches the nerve centre of the African way of doing theology. As far as Latin America is concerned, it is now redundant to state that if its liberation theologies do anything, it is to raise a big question mark against all the traditional ways of doing theology. Emilio A. Nunez says in his recent book *Liberation Theology* (Moody Press, Chicago: 1985): '... It is indispensable to remember that in liberation theology we are confronted with a new theological method having its own point of departure, its own special relationship to the theology of the Church, its own hermeneutic norm and its own philosophical framework.'

The first article, in original by Klaus Bockmuehl deals head on with the theme of doing theology. The precise definition of the three 'horizons' of theology and of one opposition to it make the reading of the essay exciting and thought-provoking. The article by Robert Reymond gives a thorough justification of theology, especially in its biblical models of Jesus, the Apostles and the New Testament Church. This is followed by a sound exegesis of an important but controversial text by Hans Walter Wolff; the author demonstrates the valid use of the Bible in theologization. Next, the veteran missiologist Arthur Glasser traces how a particular area of theology (here, it is mission) is developed during the last several decades—and so gives another aspect of theologization. Costas also traces a similar history, but not of p.4 any area of theology but of the context out of which theology necessarily gets its cutting edge: there are new insights here. Beyond their relevance to theologization, all these articles deal with issues crucial to current debates and so have theological worth of their own. We also publish finally the second part of the document 'An Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism', as promised, the first part came out in the last issue of ERT.

Between God's revelation—the Bible—and God's people—the Church, doing theology is the inevitable step. All the disciples of Christ are all the time engaged in theologizing. Here, is there not a growing need to inquire into the very logic of Jesus himself?

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Three Horizons for Theology

Klaus Bockmuehl

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Why do theology? To which end, and for what purpose does one teach and study theology?

In a time which questions the past and all traditions that are thoughtlessly inherited, and in a time that endeavours to live rationally, one needs to have reason for doing theology. There are enough people around who challenge theology as unnecessary, or even illegitimate; as immaterial, irrelevant, unproductive, or as 'mere theory'. What is theology for? would be a question naturally asked e.g. by all who have imbibed America's spirit of pragmatism. Often, those who do theology have themselves little theoretical clarity about their purposes and horizons. (If they had this clarity, it would much more visibly influence their everyday work.)

The answer to these questions lies in a rediscovery and recapitulation of theology's intrinsic purposes and horizons. Theology does not rest in itself, it does not hold its meaning in itself. It receives its dignity from its points of reference.

Using a term from recent philosophical anthropology, we might speak of theology's 'eccentric' (ex-centric) existence, i.e. as an entity that has its centre outside itself. Christians are to 'no longer live for themselves' ([2 Cor. 5:15](#))—how would something not be determinative for Christian theology which characterizes the Christian life as a whole?

The problem arises from the tension inherent in theology's position: it has to *acquire* knowledge and then to dispense it, i.e., to serve with it, to apply that knowledge. It is a dialectic of take and give, of collecting and dispensing, of theory and practice, truth and love—another of those cases where you need to have both, two times one hundred per cent. As fallible human beings, we never find that easy. Nevertheless, the concept of teaching contains already, structurally, the two sides of collecting and dispensing, taking in and giving out, inasmuch as teaching itself presupposes learning. Christian theology in its very nature addresses itself to people, i.e., to a horizon and purpose beyond itself.

I. THEOLOGY'S HORIZON: THE CHURCH

The horizon of theology that comes to mind most immediately is the church. Theology is to serve the church, to help towards the **P. 6** edification of the 'Temple of God' which is made up of human beings. Theology serves to expand and constantly to restore that building, the church. One may see this perhaps under the image of St. Francis' reconstructing a small dilapidated chapel outside the city of Assisi, originally dedicated to the delivery from the plague. This was the first step which St. Francis of Assisi chose to take after his conversion in order to demonstrate his love of God. Or one might compare it to the more elaborate masons' guild who work towards the completion of a cathedral but continue all the time with the work of restoration that never comes to an end with such a large structure, especially today when industry's emissions of acid smoke attack and corrode the building material.

The church is never established once and for all. This is obvious in view of the ever-flowing stream of generations of humanity. The people of God are under the charge 'that we should not hide the things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us, but tell the coming generation of the glorious deeds of the Lord and his might and the wonderful works that he has done' ([Ps. 74:3f.](#)).

This then is the horizon of theology: the future life of the church; to present each generation anew with the evidence of God's grace and glory. Therefore theology must always become contemporary, although it has its fundamentals and its basic content, its 'dogma' in the past. Dogma, i.e., that which is to be taught, is for us not just a collection of doctrinal propositions, but primarily the facts of the history of salvation.

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, has given us a handy and concise formula for these aspects of service, which theology must adopt: it is committed to 'the defence and confirmation of the gospel' ([Phil. 1:7](#)). That includes defence: the theologian will in part resemble a watchdog who defends the flock, or at least detects, engages, perhaps unmasks the assailant. This represents the task of apologetics. For a variety of reasons, that today is a difficult and unpleasant task. But in principle, the Church is always, as it were, moving in hostile territory where the duties of reconnaissance and defence are indispensable.

Using a reference that has often been pondered in the history of Christian doctrine, we might say that theology, serving the church, in its own ways continues Christ's threefold work, his prophetic, priestly, and royal offices: the prophetic office in the task of teaching, the priestly office defined as 'presenting every man mature in Christ' ([Col. 1:28](#)), and the royal office, not in the sense of dominion ([Mt. 20:20](#)), *not* according to the human adage, 'Knowledge is power', but in the [p.7](#) Old Testament sense of a king's task of shepherding and service to the people—in a word, *pastoral* work.

Teaching, nurturing, shepherding and defending the church: this is the continuation of Christ's own work. This was at first the work of the apostle, summed up by Paul in the words 'my concern for all the churches' ([2 Cor. 11:28](#)). It is then also an attitude and ethos which the theologian must follow. If we pray for the church with the words of the Psalmist: 'O God, see and have regard for this vine and the vineyard which your right hand has planted' ([Ps. 80:14f.](#)), we must also be ready to be employed by God in the respective work of cultivation in God's plantation.

Some of us indeed need a new dedication and commitment to the church as such. This applies in two ways: one, that we distinguish between the 'macro-' and the 'micro-' aspect of the church (as they speak of macro- and micro-economics). We must learn to concern ourselves both with the present and with the prospects of the whole of Christianity ('my concern for all the churches'), the macro-aspect, and with the welfare of our immediate fellow-Christian or our own congregation, the micro-aspect. Secondly, commitment to the life of the church may mean that we put its welfare and prosperity before all other considerations. If we all now apply ourselves to social ethics: to the poor, to race relations, and to the problems of peace, who will make the well-being of the 'vineyard' his overarching purpose?

Clearly, theology is the maid-servant of the church, and those are mistaken who pursue theology as an end in itself or feel responsible only to a community of scholars. If it should have come to pass that we have become estranged from this first horizon of theology, the commitment to the church, we might at least begin to recover ground by permitting this horizon to form and determine our prayer, our *prayer* of intercession.

II. THEOLOGY'S HORIZON: HUMANITY

Christian theology has a commitment to a second horizon, i.e. to humanity. Its purpose here is the physical and spiritual sustainment of humanity as God's creation.

This can be seen in at least three directions. One is the basic work of the sustainment of the lives of people in times of material need. In Scripture, the symbolic figure for this kind of work is Joseph in Egypt, Joseph the Provider who understands his Commission as: 'God has sent me ... to preserve life ..., to keep alive many survivors', through a period of

utter poverty and starvation ([Gen. 45:5-7](#)). Theology's task, [p. 8](#) then, is to teach a householder-ethic, to keep this horizon of preserving life in mind all the time and to inspire and train those people who are meant to take practical responsibility in this way.

Second, this programme of physical preservation has its counterpart in the realm of the moral and spiritual. Theology mediates what sometimes has been called the 'civilizing effect of the Gospel'. This comes to pass primarily through the proclamation of the commandments. Their work is the civilization and ordering of the wild and untamed drives and inclinations of humanity. We can think of the moral education of humanity as cultivating of some acreage or even as opening up a whole continent. It takes the form of 'forays into the primeval forest', the creation of clearances which are then tilled and cultivated to bring produce and fruit in the sustainment of social life.

In his attempt to prove the non-existence of God, John Wisdom, the British agnostic, devised the intriguing analogy of a clearing in the jungle, with nicely laid-out garden beds, but where you were never able to see the gardener, nor ever to trap him—perhaps by night, through spread-out wires or some means—,proving in effect that there could not be a gardener at all. Ayer chose a very pertinent and meaningful image. The world, human society and civilization especially, indeed is similar to such an opening in the midst of nature seen as a vast, unchartable forest. (The image, by the way, also intimates that the question how order in the midst of chaos and wilderness could have come about, whether by chance or not, i.e. the teleological argument for the existence of God, can never come to rest!)

However, not only is the *development* of human life and culture a task of moral education in the beginning: civilization and culture need *continued* care and maintenance; they must constantly be defended against the pressure of the surrounding jungle of moral anarchism and chaos. Of this battle in defence of civilized human existence against the destructive forces in human nature the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset said, 'Rest and relax for a moment, and the jungle creeps in'. There can be no culture or civilization without a moral and spiritual structure that is constantly serviced.

Theology has this task of teaching and maintaining God's creational ordinances and commandments and so helping to fulfil God's cultural commission to sustain human life. Without this ongoing work, nations will sink into Godlessness, anarchy, and self-destruction. At the same time, this means setting up the presupposition for the fulfilment of Christ's Great Commission.

The third contribution of theology towards the preservation of culture and human existence lies in the practical presentation of [p. 9](#) regenerate men and women who have a distinct and regenerating effect on the life of society also. Again here, theology must teach the macro- *and* the micro-aspect of the Christian commitment to the sustainment of humanity, to mankind as much as to the man who fell among the robbers.

The physical and moral sustainment of *humanity* is not a horizon of theology to which evangelicals relate easily. Sometimes their general attitude is not dissimilar to the mediaeval lifestyle of withdrawal and contemplation of another world. Even when their interest is directed to the world we are living in, evangelicals tend to concentrate and limit their loyalty to church or chapel. Such attitude tends to be little concerned with the question, 'Where is humanity going?' and dispenses itself from the household-ethos laid out earlier. Sometimes, therefore, one has to look out to some of the mainline churches to perhaps find a place where the sustainment of creation and the compassion for the large flock of sheep without a shepherd have a denominational homestead.

In a dramatic way, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, evangelicals were challenged to recover this wider horizon of the biblical householder ethic. In a memorable speech given in Sweden in 1938, Frank N. D. Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group

movement, challenged his listeners to go beyond their established interests. Some wished to see their own lives changed, he said. That was good and indeed necessary. Some hoped to learn how to change others. Very good also. Some were looking out for a revival. Even better! But then there was a fourth level of concern, namely the question: how can a crumbling civilization be saved?

This is where evangelicals sometimes find it difficult to follow. It is conceivable that in the summer of 1938, some people would have made fun of the phrase, 'to save a crumbling civilization', because they could not perceive a threat to society of that magnitude. Worse, some evangelicals might have said to themselves as a matter of principle: What do I care? I hold no brief for saving civilization. It is going to crumble anyway.

Less than a year later World War II had begun. In its course, it brought untold death and suffering to many nations, not least to God's own people of Israel. I wonder whether evangelicals looking at World War II and the Holocaust really mean to shrug their shoulders and say: 'What do you expect? That is the lot of fallen humanity'.

Since the end of the last war, we have seen Western civilization, i.e. the civilization of those nations that received the Gospel, crumble in yet other ways: in the breakdown of its moral structure and the [p. 10](#) consequent misery of large numbers of human beings—the destruction of family life for millions, a tidal wave of dissolution of marriages, of cruelty and crime, of annihilation of unborn children. The one thing still missing to date is the logical end of it all: civil war and general anarchy. Again, should all that suffering, borne by guilty and innocent alike, as the outcome of man's rebellion against God, leave the Christian unperturbed and merely evoke a scolding 'I told you so'?

Theology does have an immediate correlation to the well-being of humanity, because the latter directly corresponds to the observation of the divine ordinance for creation and the blessing coming with it. 'To save a crumbling civilization' means nothing else than to go back to the Ten Commandments and especially the First, and to teach nations respectively.

In addition, theology—through the Church—owes the world the proclamation of the Gospel, the implementation of the Great Commission, making disciples of all nations. It is not without relevance that Frank Buchman named the concern for the survival of civilization after he had spoken about personal change. He envisaged no prospect of saving humanity without the concrete conversion of at least a creative minority. This exactly fits the Old Testament principle of the ten just people for the sake of whose presence a city may be spared. Abraham for one prayed to this extent, pleading for the salvation of his city. Christians should do no less than that. They have been expressly taught to make 'requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for everyone—especially for kings and all those in authority ...' ([1 Tim. 2:1f.](#)). This prayer is the beginning of the exercise of Christian concern for humanity.

III. THEOLOGY'S HORIZON: GOD

We have reminded ourselves that the life of the church must be the horizon of theology. We have pointed to the existence of humanity as a second horizon of theology. The third emphasis must be on God as the horizon of theology.

This can easily seem to be a truism: is not God the object of theology anyway? Indeed, but that definition does not safeguard theology from examining God just like a flower or a stone or a corpse.

If God is truly the horizon of theology, then theology in itself must be divine service, service of God. If it is true that the First Commandment is the basic presupposition of all theology in the biblical mode, then the first petition of the Lord's prayer, 'Hallowed be [p.](#)

11 your name', must be theology's primary intent. Theology must become *doxology*, glorification of God. [Psalm 71:14](#), 'I will yet add to all your praise', must be its watchword.

Christian theology will therefore always include a spiritual commitment. In the last analysis, a formula like 'Theology and Spirituality' ought to be a tautology, saying the same thing twice over: theology already includes spirituality, inasmuch as it is doxology, praise of God. It is surely essential to have courses on Christian spirituality. However, spirituality cannot be seen merely as the topic of a special lecture course as an appendix to the theological curriculum, just as academic excellence cannot be the subject of a particular class. Both academic excellence and spirituality are part of, and must permeate, the whole of theology.

What we are looking at, theology and doxology, can be further described under two aspects, one internal and the other external.

The internal aspect is best expressed by saying that theology has the *love of God* as its presupposition and its aim. Theology must always take to heart the words of blessing in the Anglican Order of Communion: 'The peace of God ... keep your hearts and minds in the *knowledge and love* of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

'Knowledge and love of God' is the proper biblical rendering of that term borrowed from the Greek, 'theology'. Whoever preaches the First Commandment, the foundational principle of theology, will also have to look towards its positive complement, the commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment' ([Mt. 22:37f.](#)). In doing theology, love of God then is the true corollary of knowing God. It is the proper safeguard against dealing with God as with a dead object, an attitude that we can otherwise never be sure to evade.

What is love of God? It is not the mystical fusion between man and godhead, another design with which man thinks he can enthusiastically surpass—and master—that which the Bible teaches. On the other hand, love of God overcomes the distance of servanthood with which others have described the God-relationship. It is neither merger nor distance; therefore Scripture speaks of Christians as 'children of God'. Love of God is like the trusting and obedient love children might have towards their parents.

Love also means friendship. Love of God includes identifying with God's concerns (something that theology as mere knowledge of God again does not guarantee). This is well expressed in the lines of Manfred Siebald, a Christian singer popular in Europe: 'I will rejoice p. 12 when people speak well of you, and will be sad, when someone scoffs and jeers.' Or, with other words from the same source: theology, when it loves God, will 'penetrate the world and bring it back to God'.

Such love of God is the basic presupposition of Christian theology. The Old Testament already indicates: Knowledge comes through communion. Love of God is therefore the pre-condition of true knowledge of God.

The best model for love of God we have in Jesus as e.g. the Gospel of John depicts him. His is not a sentimental but a determined love, comprising utter trust, unity of mind, obedience, and a commitment to loyalty, come rain or shine.

Jesus expects the same from his disciples. The question in [John 20](#), 'Do you love me?', seems to define the one and only condition for working in Christ's kingdom. It addresses the theologian, too. It is by far not taken seriously enough in today's theology; the same is true of the commission for the same chapter, 'Feed my sheep'.

However, love of God, where it comes about, is a gift from God ([Rom. 5:5](#)); it must first of all be received. Therefore we can safely say: all theological endeavour worth its salt will have to begin with a prayer of supplication—for the Holy Spirit who creates the love of God in a person's heart. That is the beginning of theology.

Love of God is not only the prerequisite, it is also the end and target of theology; theology's task is above all to promote, inspire, encourage, uphold and strengthen love of God in people. With all its labour, theology is to work towards the goal that people love God with all their heart. 'That is the first and greatest commandment', and at the same time it fulfils the actual purpose of the divine work of salvation.

If, then, love of God is both the presupposition and the aim of theology, we are facing a sequence of 'loving God—knowing God—loving God', from love to love, which matches the same formula about faith in [Romans 1:17](#).

Concerning this, Protestant theology has a long way to catch up to normal. In Protestantism, we are faced with a tradition of disregard, if not discrimination, of love for God, and the virtual reduction of our God-relation to the attitude of faith. Probably this represents a reaction to the wrong place that love of God was given in the mediaeval doctrine of salvation. The Catholic church said that faith alone did not save, but only a faith characterized by love (*fides caritate formata*). That of course smacked of works-righteousness and was rejected outright by the Reformers. However, there is yet a whole life to be lived on the basis of justification by faith alone, and it is a life of love for God and neighbour. To separate love from faith would be nothing [p. 13](#) but another example of elevating a negative reaction into a positive proposition—which is at best but a dim reflection of the truth.

There may yet be another reason for the lack of an attitude of worship and love of God in theology, the destructive consequences of which are incalculable. The problem is that theology has long been taught merely as a ministry of knowledge, hardly ever as a service of love. That is a Greek inheritance. 'Greeks sought after wisdom' ([1 Cor. 1:22](#)). St. Paul and St. John, however, united truth and love, and in so doing separated Christianity from the Greek mentality.

Even beyond that necessary correction of theory, what is practically needed in theology today, is more eagerness and determination concerning the glory of God, so that we would earnestly seek God's honour in theology, church, and national life. There seem to be far too few people who pursue such purpose single-mindedly, even if they still go about it in a somewhat dilettante way. Both among the old and the young there is too little zeal for God today.

Theology is doxology. Love of God speaks: 'I will yet add to all your praise' ([Ps. 71:14](#)). This leads to the second, i.e., the *external* aspect mentioned. If theology is essential praise of God, it must have the immediate effect of *proclamation* of God's glory. This is something that we are more easily aware of. It is theology's natural desire and horizon to 'proclaim and publish' ([Jonah 3:7](#)) the honour of God, until 'the whole earth be filled with his glory, Amen and Amen' ([Ps. 72:19](#)). When the psalmist proclaims, 'All the earth shall worship you and sing praises to you; they shall sing praises to your name' ([Ps. 66:4](#)), then that is still in the future, and on the horizon. Pointing the way towards it today, however, is the task of theology.

IV. THE THREE HORIZONS: INTER-RELATIONS

In enumerating three horizons for theology, we have spoken first of the church, second of humanity, and third of God. This sequence was prompted by the degree to which people might habitually connect theology with any of these horizons. The proper order would of course be first God, second the church, and third humanity.

If we list them in this order, and so put 'love of God' in first place, we will see behind the three horizons of theology Christ's *Double Commandment of Love*—love of God and love of neighbour—thereby dividing the second commandment according to the biblical

procedure into love of (Christian) brother and love of neighbour. In a nutshell, then, it can be said that *theology must do its work in fulfilment of the Double Commandment of Love.* p. 14

The two sides of this Double Commandment are closely interrelated, in the sense that whosoever loves God will necessarily become a benefactor of people. One thinks of [Psalm 84:5f.](#), Israel's pilgrimage psalm: 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you (O Lord), in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the valley of Baca (misery, a desolate place), they make it a place of springs.'

Those who found in God the source of their strength and the goal of their journey, then begin to create new prospects for life even under adverse conditions, create springs, and oases in a desert, and establish 'sanctuaries', both places of worship and places of refuge in the torrents of history, for those generations of humanity that seemed to be bereft of grace.

To turn a dry and dismal situation into 'a place of springs' is a task of spiritual as well as material dimensions. Where there is love of God, everything is set up for bringing about the benefit for people, too. On the other hand, not much substantial welfare work can be expected, where the premise of faith and friendship with God is missing.

It is, moreover, the natural thing that all three horizons be kept in mind simultaneously. Perhaps it does not even take separate acts to address them all, if we do theology in a truly biblical fashion. As an analogy, the great spiritual oratorios, those by Johann Sebastian Bach among others, the Christmas oratorio, or the St. Matthew Passion, seem to serve all three horizons: they glorify God, they contain spiritual edification and instruction for the believer, but in addition they obviously have a generally civilizing effect. I wonder whether the same cannot also be said about the great cathedrals and their sculptures, friezes and paintings—that is, wherever art is used enhance the communication of the Gospel. Theology's work is not dissimilar to this, and also alike in its manifold effects.

Theology can be like the building of a cathedral or the composition of an oratorio. More often, it will perhaps be like the ongoing, more humble work of restoration of the chapel that has suffered from corrosion and neglect over time or the present-day performance of an oratorio created in the past. Both, however, the original and the reproduction, have an intrinsic dignity, even if they mean toil and labour, because of the majesty and magnitude of the object implied.

God, church, and humanity are the three indispensable horizons of theology. Let me underline this with a further reference. That threesome seems to have impressed itself on a medieval monastic author (published under the name of St. Bernard) even as he planned to write otherwise. In a treatise on 'How to Live Well', this author has an extended chapter arguing the superiority of the contemplative life of p. 15 the monk and the nun in the monastery over the active life of the working man and woman in the world. These latter live '*in mola*', in the mill (taken from [Mt. 24:48](#))—really a treadmill!—whereas monk and nun are '*in sinu*', in Abraham's bosom, in the bliss with God (taken from [Lk. 16:22](#)).

Of course, the author does not fail to exploit the pericope of Martha and Mary for his purpose. The monk and nun, sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary, have chosen the one thing necessary. Suddenly, however, the author becomes aware of a third position that needs looking after: the one '*in agro*', the priest, in the field, where the task is, as it were, the continuation of the work of Christ Himself, sowing the Word of God into the field of humanity ('the field is the world', [Mt. 13:37](#))—the proclamation of the Word, making disciples of all nations.

Our monastic author then acknowledges the existence of three modes of life: life in the world, in the church, and in missions, and with God, although he, of course, attaches

different value to them. Also, in his time he felt that the three lifestyles were cast into three different groups of people: the workaday layman in the 'mill', the parish priest in the 'field', and the monk in the presence of God through contemplation.

The Reformation, reverting to the New Testament, attempted to show that fundamentally all three modes of life are both the privilege and duty of *every* Christian: to work under the cultural commission of the Creator, to fulfil the Great Commission of the Saviour, *and* to experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. And they all three have their own intrinsic value respectively.

Thus, likewise, theology must be committed to three horizons of the Christian: to God, church, and humanity.

V. OPPOSITION: SECULARISM

If the commitment of theology is, as has been said, rightly represented by the Psalmist's prayer, 'I will yet add to all your praise', then theology must always find itself in opposition and combat with another form of commitment, dedicated to the pursuit of a quite different horizon. For the resolve, 'I will yet add to all your praise', is the direct antithesis to *secularism* and human autonomy. This is the attitude of Prometheus, the ancient rebel of Greek mythology, who rejects the idea of submission to God, and wants to be the Creator of his own world, collecting all the praise for himself. **P. 16**

Secularism, the philosophy of human self-rule and self-development, may perhaps welcome theology's concern for humanity. It will sometimes even allow for theology's occupation with the church, as some sub-division of humanity. In the manner in which secularism does at times respect ethnic diversity, it might concede a breathing space or a niche of existence for the church on the grounds of the preservation of folklore. There is some of this sentiment around today in the more enlightened universities and in liberal governments. However, secularism will never be reconciled to theology's first horizon, the primacy and kingship of God, because it is in itself the very negation of the same, and the solemn confession of man's autonomy and omnipotence.

Insofar as theology's first horizon, the kingship and honour of God, is the strength and inspiration of its two other horizons, the denial of that first horizon would quickly make theology useless also in its intended service to church and humanity. It would become the salt that 'is good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men' ([Mt. 5:13](#)). This description fits a theology that has forgotten God. For theology, therefore, along with its first horizon, God, also the two other horizons are at stake. This means, essentially, that there cannot be a partial arrangement of theology with secularism.

In the eternal confrontation of these two competitors our own age seems to present the picture of an overall advance of secularism. Indeed, in terms of the success of its propaganda and of its actual accumulation of power, the advance of secularism is as real, manifold, cunning, and seemingly irresistible as was Hitler's advance and expansion in Europe in the years before World War II. Those who early on studied the nature of this phenomenon felt stunned and helpless year after year, when he landed one scoop after the other, and one territory after the other fell into the orbit of the dictator.

Secularism, the system that rejects or ignores the sovereignty of God, has been similarly successful in our time. God has allowed its advance. One is reminded of [Psalm 74:15](#), 'You broke open fountains and brooks; you dried up mighty rivers'. Such can be said also of periods in the spiritual history of humanity, and of Christianity in the West: rivers of spiritual life, once mighty, have dried up under the scorching breach of secularism.

The history of Israel presents us with striking analogies to the spiritual crises of our time. Does not the psalmist's wailing over Israel as God's vineyard also apply to some contemporary churches: 'Why have you broken down its wall so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit ... and ravage it?' ([Ps. 80:12](#); cf. [79:1](#)). This image seems to fit some Protestant churches which were planted and 'took [p. 17](#) deep root and filled the land' ([Ps. 80:9](#)) after the Reformation, but are now stripped and torn up by every bypasser—i.e., by all the philosophical and ideological fashions that come and go, by existentialism, sociology, psychologism, group dynamics, anarchism, diverse political programmes, etc. It is ever so absurd that the church, vehicle and representative of the divine doctrine of salvation, should welcome and submit itself to all these secular programmes of salvation—for such they all are. Man cannot avoid producing his own myths of salvation once he has rejected the biblical gospel. The irony and tragic paradox in today's church is that we apparently prefer to listen to worldly prophets and obtain our revelations from paganism.

In addition, the cry, 'O God, heathen have come into your inheritance' ([Ps. 79:1](#)) seems to be the proper description of the advancement of secularism *within theology* itself. Originally, the plan was to be the reverse: 'He [God] apportioned the nations for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their houses' ([Ps. 78:55](#)). That was to be the analogy to the relationship e.g. between theology and philosophy: existing thought concepts were to be made serviceable to theology and thus to the people of God. As an aside: this indeed is a task of continuing relevance for theology. 'Freedom of theology from philosophy'—that popular slogan can only mean theology's supremacy, not the annihilation or ignoring of philosophy. Theology will utilize elements of the form, but not the contents, the creeds and confessions of philosophy. Theology, as all our thinking, is embedded in language and terminology. Nevertheless, who rules over whom, who determines policy and direction, and who are the free citizens, who are the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', ought to be established clearly between theology and philosophy. Therefore there is no such thing as an 'absolute' theology which would not make use of existing thought-forms, categories, and concepts.

Who serves whom? At present, theology serves far too often as lackey and train-bearer of secularist philosophies, paying homage, burning incense to the idols of public opinion that are intellectually in fashion at any moment. Whenever theology becomes a fellow-traveller in the parade of the *saeculum*, an alienation from its own true God must quietly have taken place before, a period of attempted self-sufficiency, self-rule, self-confidence, self-service. At one point, there must have been a deliberate stop to listening to God's Word, followed by an effort to construe the highest good from below, with existing materials and thus in a syncretistic manner. From there it is only a short road to the new subservience to idolatry.

Whom does theology serve? That is the key problem. Its solution [p. 18](#) will have far reaching consequences either way. The decomposition of theology and church, i.e., of the temple as the place where God's praise should have its dwelling, will mean that other fields of human valuation, literature, economics must also decay because the centre is no longer intact.

VI. CONCLUSION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

'Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain ... against the Lord and his anointed?' ([Ps. 2:1](#)). It somehow seems to be 'normal' that God is surrounded by human enmity. How should it be easier for theology? In the midst of secularism, theology must stand up for the hallowing of God's name. Its task is to announce God ever anew to an

ungodly and godless generation. And perhaps it will fall to our lot, where circumstances demand it, to even announce God afresh to theology.

In a situation characterized by the advance of secularism, love of God and the First Commandment need to be given new emphasis. Some try to evade this confrontation. They endeavour to keep the salt pure by separating it from the earth. Christ, however, called his disciples to be 'salt of the world'. That clearly is a paradox, a forceful conjunction of two antithetical elements. Christ's disciples are to be 'in the world, but not of the world'. The same goes for theology. The best service that it can give to the world is the unabated proclamation of God's law and gospel.

This is something that neither the withdrawers nor the Christian advocates of accommodation or submission to the spirit of the age seem to understand. If the people of God are to 'live in their houses' ([Ps. 78:55](#)), i.e., if the truth of the Gospel is to find a home in the houses of the heathen, then the solution of the Rechabites ([Jer. 35](#)) imitated by some evangelicals today, i.e., to culturally and intellectually live in tents next door to society, cannot be the way. We find ourselves with the task to steer straight through between withdrawal and surrender to secularism. This course must determine the solution of all individual problems, from epistemology to ethics.

Here we get into the question of appropriate strategy. If we compare the advance of secularism in the church with a tidal wave or flash flood then the task is to recover lost territory. We will need to build dykes, to 'draw a line'. That looks like defensive action. However the Dutch have shown us that building dykes (e.g. the great closing dykes in the north and west of Holland) can very well be a means of offensive. We sometimes may need, in our individual lives as well as [p. 19](#) in the lives of churches or nations, a fundamental decision comparable to building a dyke, behind which we can then begin to wrestle patches and sections of 'polder' land from the sea winning fertile acreage, positively cultivating new life under the protection of a basic refusal.

How does all this apply today? What does 'I will yet add to all your praise' mean in our generation? It would mean the emergence, in the remaining two decades of this century, of new spiritual power centres, of movements of concentration towards the love of God and praise of God, in the sense of the three first petitions of the Lord's Prayer. There have been such 'nodal points' before in history, periods of intensification of awareness of, and commitment to, God. We should strive for such a development in our own generation.

A word of warning: to bring humanity back to God and to turn theology God-ward again, or at least to incorporate a public alternative to secularism—this is not necessarily identical with evangelicalism. Admittedly there are valuable points and possessions in this camp. However, there can also be among evangelicals, both quite unregenerate stubbornness and incompetence regarding some of the relevant issues. Conversion to God is never the same as conversion to a peculiar ecclesiastical party or denomination.

We are after all a re-Christianization of theology. Again, this is not a matter of the spirit of a certain locale which was traditionally associated with renewal. Also, it is not a matter of a particular kind of language. Indeed, how difficult is it even to utter ten coherent sentences towards this concern with some degree of force and authority! It is always difficult to spell out a vision. What it takes, is a continuous, qualitative, spiritual change in our theological work. And that can begin anywhere.

One needs to be thankful for all that has already been given to us. In addition, one would dearly invite everybody who shares the vision, wherever he may come from, to help point out the way to a renewal of theology.

There is one final concern which, if we didn't notice it for ourselves, the psalms quoted would quickly call to our attention. It refers to the basic problem, even the paradox of

theology:—i.e., entrusting to human hands a divine task. We are faced with the incapacity of man for the task of theology, speaking of God.

One becomes conscious of this problem only when one understands what theology truly is. As long as we think of theology in terms of religious anthropology, or of the history, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, of religion, we are on relatively safe ground—because we are dealing with nothing but ourselves. As soon, however, [p. 20](#) as we have to understand and speak the things of *God*, we are incompetent, as incompetent as any other human being. It takes a cleansing of our lips ([Is. 6](#)); it takes an act of forgiveness on God's part ([Ps. 78:38ff.](#)) to establish and restore theology to its proper position and so to its three horizons of commitment. It also takes an act of God to bring about another nodal point in history when his truth prevails again over man's lies and rebellion, and when he himself, now seemingly distant, as well as the distant church, distant humanity, and our distant neighbour come into focus again.

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The Justification of Theology with a Special Application to Contemporary Christology

Robert L. Reymond

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Reymond's following article makes a very beneficial reading for several reasons. Not only does he present the four-fold justification/basis for theology but he also adequately demonstrates these bases in his own theologization. Moreover, his two case studies on Bultmann's Existential Jesus as well as Käsemann's Docetic Christ are good inquiries in their own rights. Further the choice of christology is undoubtedly a central issue in any christian theology in any time, makes this article very exciting.

Editor

The highly esteemed American philosopher-theologian of revered and recent memory, Dr. Gordon Haddon Clark, begins his 1984 book, *In Defense of Theology*, with the following statement:

Theology, once acclaimed 'the Queen of the Sciences', today hardly rises to the rank of a scullery maid; it is often held in contempt, regarded with suspicion, or just ignored.¹

If Professor Clark is correct in his assessment, that is to say, if there is today this widespread disregard bordering on contempt for theology, one might at first blush be

¹ Gordon Haddon Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Milford, Michigan: Mott Media, 1984), p. 3.

excused if he should feel it entirely proper to be done with theology altogether and to devote his time and energies to some intellectual pursuit holding out promise of higher esteem among men. The issue can be pointedly framed in the form of a question: How is theology,² as an intellectual discipline deserving today of the church's highest interest and of the occupation of men's minds, to be justified?

² The term 'theology' is used in this paper in the somewhat restricted but still fairly broad sense for the disciplines of the classical divinity curriculum with its departments of exegetical, historical, systematic, and practical theology, or for what is practically the same thing, namely, the intelligent effort which seeks to understand the Bible, viewed as revealed truth, as a coherent whole.

THE BIBLICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR THEOLOGY

When we inquire into the justification of theology, if I understand its **p. 22** intended import, what we are asking is simply this: Why should we engage ourselves in intellectual and scholarly reflection on the message and content of the Holy Scripture? And a related question is this: Why do we do this, as Christians, the particular way that we do? To these questions, I would suggest, the New Testament offers at least the following four reasons:³ (1) Christ's own theological method, (2) Christ's mandate to teach in the Great Commission, (3) the apostolic model, and (4) the apostolically-approved example and activity of the New Testament church. Consider each of these briefly with me.

Christ's Own Theological Method

It is Christ Himself, by His example and method of interpretation, who established for His church both the prerogative and the pattern to exegete the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in the special way that it does, and to derive from those Scriptures, by theological deduction, their special application to His person and work. This is clear from the New Testament itself. For in addition to those specific occasions when He applied the Old Testament to Himself (cf., for example, [Matt. 22:41-45](#); [Luke 4:14-21](#); [John 5:46](#)), we are informed in [Luke 24:25-27](#) that 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, the glorified Christ *explained* [*diermeneusen*] to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself' (emphasis supplied). Beyond all controversy, such an exhaustive engagement in Scripture exposition involved our Lord in theological activity in the most heightened sense.

In his small book, *According to the Scriptures*, with great sensitivity and depth of insight, C. H. Dodd develops the point I am making here. Let us listen to this eminent biblical scholar for a few moments:

At the earliest period of Church history to which we can gain access, we find in being the rudiments of an original, coherent and flexible method of biblical exegesis which was already beginning to yield results.

... Very diverse scriptures are brought together so that they interpret one another in hitherto unsuspected ways. To have brought together, for example, the Son of Man who is the people or the saints of the Most High, the Man of God's right hand, who is also the vine of Israel, the Son of Man who after humiliation is crowned with glory and honour, and the victorious priest-king at the right hand of God, is an achievement of interpretative imagination which results in the creation of an entirely new figure. It involves an original, and far-reaching, resolution of the tension between **p. 23** the individual and the collective aspects of several of these figures, which in turn makes it possible to bring into a single focus the 'plot' of the Servant poems ... of the psalms of the righteous sufferer, and of the prophecies of the fall and recovery (death and resurrection) of the people of God, and finally offers a fresh understanding of the mysterious imagery of apocalyptic eschatology.

This is a piece of genuinely creative thinking. Who was responsible for it? The early Church, we are accustomed to say, ... But creative thinking is rarely done by committees, useful as they may be for systematizing the fresh ideas of individual thinkers, and for stimulating them to further thought. It is individual minds that originate. Who was the originating mind here?

Among Christian thinkers of the first age known to us there are three of genuinely creative power: Paul, the author to the Hebrews, and the Fourth Evangelist. We are

³ I wish to express my indebtedness to conversations with Professor David C. Jones, my friend and colleague in the Systematics Department at Covenant Theological Seminary for some of the thoughts I am expressing here.

precluded from proposing any one of them for the honour of having originated the process, since even Paul, greatly as he contributed to its development, demonstrably did not originate it ... The New Testament itself avers that it was Jesus Christ Himself who first directed the minds of His followers to certain parts of the Scriptures as those in which they might find illumination upon the meaning of His mission and destiny ... I can see no reasonable ground for rejecting the statements of the gospels that (for example) He pointed to Psalm cx as a better guide to the truth about His mission and destiny than the popular beliefs about the Son of David, or that He made that connection of the 'Lord' at God's right hand with the Son of Man in Daniel which proved so momentous for Christian thought, or that He associated with the Son of Man language which had been used of the Servant of the Lord, and employed it to hint at the meaning, and the issue, of His own approaching death. To account for the beginning of this most original and fruitful process of rethinking the Old Testament we need to postulate a creative mind. The gospels offer us one.⁴

Beyond dispute the gospels depict Jesus of Nazareth as entering deeply into the engagement of mind with Scripture and drawing out original and fascinating theological deductions therefrom. And it is He who establishes for us the pattern and end of our own theologizing: if we would be His disciples, we must follow Him in making the interpretation of Scripture the basis and norm of our theology, and we must arrive finally at *Him* in all of our theological labours. p. 24

The Mandate in the Great Commission

Theology is a task of the Church; of this there can be no doubt. For after setting for us the example and establishing for us the pattern and end of all theology, the glorified Christ commissioned His Church to *teach (didaskantes)* all nations ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)). And theology, essential to this teaching, serves in carrying out the Great Commission as it seeks to set forth in a logical and coherent manner the truth God has revealed in holy Scripture about Himself and the world He has created.

The divine Commission to the Church to disciple, baptize, and teach all nations clearly places upon the Church, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, certain *intellectual* demands. There is the *evangelistic* demand to address the gospel to the needs of every generation; for the Commission is to disciple all the nations, with no restriction as to time and place. There is the *didactic* (or catechetical) demand 'to correlate the manifold data of revelation in our understanding and the more effectively to apply this knowledge to all phases of our thinking and conduct.'⁵ Finally, there is as we have already noted, the *apologetic* (or polemic) demand ultimately to justify the existence of Christianity and to protect the message of Christianity from adulteration and distortion (cf. [Tit. 1:9](#)). Theology has risen, and properly so, in the life of the Church in response to these concrete demands in fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Apostolic Model

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: James Nisbet and Co.: 1952), pp. 108-110. Two caveats are in order here, however. First while we obviously appreciate Dodd's granting to Jesus alone the creative genius to bring these several Old Testament themes together to enhance understanding of His person and work, it is extremely important to insist that, in so doing, Jesus did not bring a meaning to the Old Testament that was not intrinsic to the Old Testament itself. Second, I believe that the 'Son of Man' in [Daniel 7:13-14](#) is properly to be interpreted individually as applying to Christ rather than collectively as Dodd suggests.

⁵ John Murray, 'Systematic Theology', *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXV (May, 1963), p. 138.

Such activity as eventually led to the Church's engagement in theology is found not only in the teaching of Jesus Christ but also in the rest of the New Testament. Paul wastes no time after his baptism in his effort to 'prove' (*sumbibazōn*) to his fellow Jews that Jesus is the Christ ([Acts 9:22](#)). Later, as a seasoned missionary, he enters the synagogue in Thessalonica 'and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* [*dielexato*, 'dialogued'] with them *from the Scriptures* [N.B.], *explaining* [*dianoignōn*] and *proving* [*paratithemenos*] that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead' ([Acts 17:2-3](#); emphasis supplied). The learned Apollos 'vigorously *refuted* [*diakatelegcheto*] the Jews in public debate, *proving* [*epideiknus*] *from the Scriptures* [N.B.] that Jesus was the Christ' ([Acts 18:28](#); emphasis supplied).

Nor is Paul's evangelistic 'theologizing' limited to the synagogue. p. 25 While waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens Paul 'reasoned [*dielegeto*] in the synagogue with Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as *in the marketplace* day by day *with those who happened to be there*' ([Acts 17:17](#); emphasis supplied). This got him an invitation to address the Aeropagus which he did in terms that could be understood by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers gathered there (cf. his quotation from the Greek poets in [17:27](#)), without, however, any accommodation of his message to what they were prepared to believe. In a masterful theological summary presented with evangelistic and apologetic sensitivity, Paul carefully presented the great truths of revelation concerning the Creator, man created in His image, and man's need to come to God through the Judge and Saviour He has provided, even Jesus Christ.

But Paul's 'theologizing' was not exclusively evangelistic. In addition to that three-month period at Ephesus during which he spoke boldly in the synagogue, arguing persuasively (*dialegomenos kai peithōn*) about the Kingdom of God ([Acts 19:8](#)), Paul had discussions (*dialegemenos*) daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus over a two-year period, not hesitating, as he was to say later (cf. [Acts 20:17-35](#)), 'to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught [*didaxai*] you publicly and from house to house,' declaring to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus Christ ([Acts 20:20-21](#)). In a word, he declares: 'I have not hesitated to proclaim the *whole will of God*' ([Acts 20:27](#); emphasis supplied).

No doubt we see in the epistle to the Romans, Paul's major exposition of the message entrusted to him, not only the broad outline and essential content of the gospel he preached but also the theologizing method he employed. Notice should be taken here of the theological flow of the letter; how Paul moves logically and systematically from the plight of the human condition to God's provision of salvation in Christ, then, in turn, on to the results of justification, objections to the doctrine, and finally to the Christian ethic that results from God's mercies toward us. It detracts in no way from Paul's 'inspiredness' (Thess. [2:13](#); [2 Pet. 3:15-16](#); [2 Tim. 3:16](#)) to acknowledge, as he set forth this theological flow of thought under the Spirit's superintendence, that he reflected upon, and deduced theological conclusions from (1) earlier inspired conclusions, (2) biblical history, and (3) his own personal position in Christ. Indeed, one finds these 'theologizing reflections and deductions' embedded in the very heart of some of the Apostle's most radical assertions. For example, after stating certain propositions, at least ten times Paul asks: 'What shall we say [conclude] then?' and proceeds to 'deduce by good p. 26 and necessary consequence' the conclusion he desires his reader to reach (cf. [3:5](#), [9](#); [4:1](#); [6:1](#), [15](#); [7:7](#); [8:31](#); [9:14](#), [30](#); [11:7](#)). In the fourth chapter the Apostle draws the theological conclusion both that circumcision is unnecessary to the blessing of justification (!) and that Abraham is the spiritual father of the uncircumcised Gentle believer (!) from the simple observation based on Old Testament history that 'Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him for righteousness' ([Gen. 15:6](#)) some fourteen years *before* he was circumcised ([Gen.](#)

[17:24](#))—striking theological deductions, to say the least, to draw in his particular religious and cultural milieu simply from the ‘before and after’ relationship between two historical events! Later, to prove that ‘at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace’ ([Rom. 11:5](#)), Paul simply appeals to his own status as a Christian Jew ([Rom. 11:2](#)), again a striking assertion to derive from the simple fact of his own faith in Jesus.

The Activity of the New Testament Church

Finally, our engagement in the task and formation of theology as an intellectual discipline based upon and derived from Scripture gains additional support from the obvious activity of the New Testament church itself,⁶ for our attention is again already called in the New Testament to a body of saving truth, as in [Jude 2](#) (‘the faith once delivered to the saints’), [1 Timothy 6:20](#) (‘the deposit’), [2 Thessalonians 2:15](#) (‘the traditions’), [Romans 6:17](#) (‘the pattern of doctrine’), and the ‘faithful sayings’ of the pastoral letters of Paul ([1 Tim. 1:15, 3:1, 4:8–9; 2 Tim. 2:11–13; Tit. 3:3–8](#)).⁷ These descriptive terms and phrases unmistakably and incontestably indicate that in the days of the Apostles the theologizing process of reflecting upon and comparing Scripture, collating, deducing, and framing doctrinal statements into credal formulae approaching the character of Church confessions had already begun (cf., for example, [Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Tim. 3:16](#)). And all of this was done with the full knowledge and approval of the Apostles, indeed, with the full and personal engagement and involvement of the Apostles themselves in the theologizing process (cf., for example, in [Acts 15:1–16:5](#) the activity of the Apostles in the Jerusalem assembly, labouring not only as Apostles but also as elders in the deliberative activity of preparing a conciliar theological p. 27 response to the issue being considered then for the Church’s guidance).

Hence, when we today, under the guidance of the Spirit of God and in faith, come to holy Scripture and with all the best intellectual tools make an effort to explicate it, trace its workings in the world, systematize its teachings, and propagate its message, thus hard won, to the world, we are standing squarely in the theological process present in and witnessed and mandated by the New Testament itself!

Surely herein resides the biblical justification for the theological enterprise in our own time and our personal engagement in it. Indeed, so clear is the Scriptural mandate for theology that one is not speaking to excess were he to suggest that our concern should not be one primarily of whether we should *engage* ourselves in theology or not—the Lord of the Church and His Apostles leave us no other option here (cf. [Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2; Tit. 1:9; 2:1](#)); we have to be engaged in it if we are going to be faithful to Him. Rather, what should be of primary concern to us is whether, in our engagement in it, we are *listening* as intently and submissively as we should to Christ’s voice speaking to His Church in holy Scripture. In short, our concern should be: Is our theology correct? Or perhaps better: Is it orthodox?

A CASE IN POINT: TWO MODERN CHRISTOLOGIES

An illustration of what, for me, highlights this greater concern is what is being written today in the area of Christology. Such writing in its own way justifies in a powerful way

⁶ Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, ‘Credal Elements in the New Testament’, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1950, 1960).

⁷ Cf. George W. Knight, III, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1968), for a scholarly exposition of these faithful sayings.

the evangelical's continuing engagement in orthodox theology. Just as the central issue of Church theology in the Book of Acts was christological (cf. [9:22](#); [17:2-3](#); [18:28](#)), so also today Christ's own questions, 'What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?' ([Matt. 22:42](#)), continue to occupy centre stage in current theological debate. While the conciliar decision of Chalcedon in AD 451 empoising a two-natured Christ has generally satisfied Christian orthodoxy, it has fallen upon hard times in the Church of our day (cf., for example, an extreme example of this in *The Myth of God Incarnate*). The Church dogma that this one Lord Jesus Christ is very God and very man and is both of these in the full unabridged sense of these terms and is both of these at the same time has been increasingly rejected not only, it is alleged, on biblical grounds but also as a contradiction, an impossibility, indeed, a rank absurdity.

The Johannine phrase, *ho logos sarx egeneto*, is at the centre of the modern debate and in its own way, as a point of departure, [p. 28](#) crystallized the major issue of the current controversy: Is Christology to be a Christology 'from below', that is, is to take its starting point in a human Jesus (*sarx*), or is it to be a Christology 'from above', that is, is it to begin with the Son of God (*ho logos*) come to us from heaven? And in either case, what precisely is the import of John's choice of verbs: the *egeneto*? Faced with such questions, is it not clear that never has the need been greater for careful, biblically-governed, hermeneutically-meticulous theologizing as the church addresses the perennial question: *Who is Jesus of Nazareth?*

Any response to this question would be well-advised to recall at the outset that the ultimate aim of the early Fathers throughout the decades of controversy over this matter (AD 325-451) was simply to describe and to defend the verbal picture which the gospels and the rest of the New Testament draw of Jesus of Nazareth. Certainly, inter-nicene party strife and rancour between some individuals made complete objectivity in the debate extremely difficult at times. But a faithful reading of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers must lead one to the conclusion that it was neither the concern just to 'have it one's own way' not the desire to contrive a doctrinal formula so intellectually preposterous that it would be a stumbling block to all but the most gullible of men that led them to speak as they did of Jesus Christ as a two-natured single person. Rather, what ultimately underlay their entire effort, we may affirm without fear of correction, was simply the faithful (that is, 'full of faith') resolve to set forth as accurately as words available to them could do what the New Testament said about Jesus. If their creedal terms were sometimes the terms of earlier and current philosophy, those terms nonetheless served the Church well then (were they not simply 'contextualizing' the truths of Scripture about Christ?) and still do in most quarters of the Christian community in communicating who the Bible declares Him to be. If the 'four great Chalcedonian adverbs' (*asunkutōs*) [without confusion], *atreptō's* [without transmutation], *adiaretōs* [without division], *achōristōs* [without separation]) describe not so much how the two natures—the human and the divine—are to be related to each other in the unity of the one Person of Christ as how they *are not* to be related, again it can and should be said that these adverbs served to protect both what the Fathers believed the Scriptures clearly taught about Jesus and, at the same time, the *mystery* of His person as well. My own deep longing is that the Church today might be as faithful and perceptive in assessing the picture of Jesus in the gospels for our time as these spiritual forebears were for theirs.

I fear, however, that it is not just a modern dissatisfaction with their [p. 29](#) usage of Greek philosophical terminology or the belief that the early Fathers simply failed to read the Bible as accurately as they might have that lies behind the totally new and different reconstructions of Jesus presently being produced by some doctors in the Church. Rather, it is a new and foreign manner of reading the New Testament, brought in by the 'assured

results' of 'Enlightenment criticism'—a new hermeneutic reflecting canons of interpretation neither derived from Scripture nor sensitive to grammatical/historical rules or reading an ancient text—that is leading men to draw totally new portraits of Christ; but along with these new portraits of Christ, a Christ also emerges whose purpose is no longer to reverse the effects of a space/time fall from an original state of integrity and to bring men into the supernatural Kingdom of God and eternal life, but rather to shock the modern somehow into an existentially-conceived 'authentic existence', or into any number of other religio-psychological responses to Him.

Now I believe that it is quite in order to ask, over against the creators of these 'new Christs': Is the mindset of modern man really such that he is incapable of believing in the Christ and the so-called 'mythological kerygma' (Bultmann) of the New Testament? Is it so that modern science compels the necessity of 'demythologizing' the church's proclamation and to reinterpret it existentially? I believe not. In fact, what / find truly amazing is just how many truly impossible things (more than Lewis Carroll's seven, I assure you) that modern man is able to believe every day—such as the view that asserts that this present universe is the result of an impersonal beginning out of nothing, plus time plus chance, or that man is the result of forces latent within nature itself, or that man is essentially good and morally perfectible through education and social manipulation, or that morals need not be grounded in unchanging ethical absolutes.

It is also still in order to ask 'Who has better read and more carefully handled the biblical material—the ancient or the new Christologist—with reference to both the person and purpose of Jesus Christ?

Bultmann's Existential Jesus

Consider Bultmann, the exegete, for a moment as a case in point. When, in his commentary on John, he comes to [John 1:14](#), he writes: 'The Logos became flesh! It is the *language of mythology* that is here employed',⁸ specifically 'the mythological language of Gnosticism'.
p. 30 For Bultmann, all the emphasis in this statement falls on *sarx* and its meaning, so that 'the Revealer is nothing but a man'.⁹ Moreover, the Revealer's *doxa* 'Is not to be seen ... *through* the *sarx* ...; it is to be seen in the *sarx* and nowhere else'.

When one takes exception to this and observes, however, that this statement cannot mean that the Word became flesh and thus ceased to be the Word (who earlier was said to be in the beginning with God and who was God [[1:1](#)]), both because the Word is still the subject of the phrase that follows, 'and we beheld his glory as [the *hos* here denotes not only comparison but also identification]¹⁰ of the unique Son of the Father', (cf. TDNT, IV 740, fn. 15) whom John then further describes as 'the unique one, God [Himself; F. F. Bruce], who is the bosom of the Father' ([1:18](#)), one has just reason to wonder at the exegesis behind Bultmann's response that John's assertions are reflecting the perspective of *faith* which has understood that the revelation of *God* is located precisely in the *humanity* of Jesus, and that they are not statements about the divine *being* of Jesus but rather the later Church's mythological shaping of the *meaning* of Jesus for faith!

Can the exegete who is not a follower of the highly personal, individualistic, existential school of Bultmann be blamed if he politely demurs from this perspective? For here there remains not even a kenotic Christ who once was God and who divested Himself of His

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Translated by G. R. Beasley-Murray from *Das Evangelium des Johannes*; (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62, cf. too his statement, 'It is in his sheer humanity that he is the Revealer' (p. 63).

¹⁰ Cf. F. Buchsel, 'Monogenes', *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV, 740 (fn. 15).

deity but only an existential Christ who in *being* never was or is God but is only the Revealer of God to *faith*. But of course the ‘faith’ here is purely subjective and existential, devoid of any historical fact.

The questions must be squarely faced: Is Bultmann’s interpretation preferable to that of Chalcedon? Is it in any sense exegetically sustainable? Is not the language of [John 1:14](#) clearly the language of an *eyewitness* (cf. ‘we beheld’ and the commentary on this phrase in [1 John 1:1–3](#))? And does not the Evangelist imply in his ‘we beheld’ that *others* as well as he ‘beheld His glory’ (cf. [John 21:24](#)), which glory he identifies as (*hos*) the glory of His divine glory being evident on nearly every page of the gospels, in every sign miracle he performed, a glory which neither a bystander could overlook nor an enemy deny (cf. [2:11](#); [3:2](#); [9:16](#); [11:45–48](#); [12:10–12](#); [37–41](#); cf. [Acts 2:22](#), ‘as you [p. 31](#) yourselves know’; cf., too, [Acts 4:16](#); ‘... and we cannot deny it’).¹¹ Later, when doubting Thomas eventually came to faith in Jesus and cried out, ‘My Lord and my God’ ([20:28](#)), he did so not because an existential flash bringing new pistis appreciation of the meaning of the human Jesus for human existence overpowered him, but because his demand to see the print of the nails with his own eyes was graciously met (cf. [John 20:25](#), [27](#), [29](#)), and because the only possible implication of Christ’s resurrection appearance for the nature of His *being* (cf. [Rom. 1:4](#)) impacted inescapably upon him: ‘He is my Lord and my God!’

Bultmann’s Christology, only one of many examples of a Christology ‘from below’, represents one extreme to which faulty theologizing can lead the church—the extreme of portraying the Christ as to His being as a mere man and only a man. But this conclusion, not only the Fourth gospel but also the New Testament as a whole find intolerable. A careful consideration of each context will show that *theos*, the Greek word for ‘God’, is employed as a christological title at least eight times in the New Testament ([John 1:1](#), [18](#); [20:28](#); [1 John 5:20](#); [Rom. 9:5](#); [Tit. 2:13](#); [Heb. 1:8](#), [2 Pet. 1:1](#); cf. also [Col. 2:9](#)). Hundreds of times He is called *kurios*, ‘Lord’, the Greek word employed by the LXX to translate the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (cf., for example, [Matt. 7:21](#); [25:37](#), [44](#); [Rom. 10:9–13](#); [1 Cor. 2:8](#); [12:3](#); [2 Cor. 4:5](#); [Phil. 2:11](#); [2 Thess. 1:7–10](#)). Old Testament statements spoken by or describing Yahweh, the Old Testament God of the covenant, are applied to Christ in the New (cf., for example, [Ps. 102:25–27](#) and [Heb. 1:10–12](#); [Isa. 6:1–20](#) and [John 12:40–41](#); [Isa. 8:12–13](#) and [1 Pet. 3:14–15](#); [Isa. 45:22](#) and [Matt. 11:28](#); [Joel 2:32](#) and [Rom. 10:13](#)). Divine attributes and actions are ascribed to Him ([Mark 2:5](#), [8](#); [Matt. 18:20](#); [John 8:58](#); [Matt. 24:30](#)). Then there is Jesus’ own self-consciousness of His divine nature (cf. [John 3:13](#); [6:38](#), [46](#), [62](#); [8:23](#), [42](#); [17:6](#), [24](#); and the famous so-called ‘embryonic Fourth gospel’ in [Matt. 11:25–28](#) and [Luke 10:21–22](#)). Finally, the weight of testimony which flows from His miracles and His resurrection ([Rom. 1:4](#)) must be faced without evasion. It carries one beyond the bounds of credulity to be asked to believe that the several New Testament writers, living and writing under such varying circumstances, places, and times, were nonetheless all seduced by the same mythology of Gnosticism. All the more is this conclusion highly doubtful in light of the fact that the very presence of [p. 32](#) a pre-Christian Gnosticism has been seriously challenged by much recent scholarship.¹²

¹¹ It is directly germane to our point here to observe in connection with Christ’s first sign miracle ([John 2:1–11](#)) that John does not say that the disciples’ faith was the pathway to the beholding of Jesus’ glory, but to the contrary, that His miracle manifested His glory, and His disciples believed on Him *as a consequence*.

¹² Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, first edition, 1973; updated edition, 1983), particularly Chapter 12; cf. also C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953); the Dodd Festschrift, *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, especially the articles by W. F. Albright and R. P. Casey; and R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, p. LVI; *et al.*

Käsemann's Docetic Christ

Now, very interestingly, it is by one of Bultmann's students, Ernst Käsemann, that we find argued the other extreme in current Christology.¹³ In his *The Testament of Jesus*, Käsemann also deals at some length with the meaning of [John 1:14](#), only he argues, to use Ridderbos' words, that the Evangelist intends by *sarx* here 'not the means to veil the glory of God in the man Jesus, but just the opposite, to reveal that glory before every eye. The flesh is the medium of the glory.'

According to Käsemann, John's Jesus, far from being a man, is rather the portrayal of a god walking across the face of the earth. Commenting on 'the Word became flesh', Käsemann queries: 'Is not this statement totally over-shadowed by the confession, 'We beheld his glory', so that it receives its meaning from it?'¹⁴ Thinking it to be so, Käsemann contends that the Fourth gospel uses the earthly life of Jesus 'merely as a backdrop for the Son of God proceeding through the world ...'¹⁵ Furthermore, he urges: '... the glory of Jesus determines the [Evangelist's] whole presentation so thoroughly from the very outset that the incorporation and position of the passion narrative of necessity becomes problematical', so problematical, in fact, Käsemann believes, that 'one is tempted to regard it as being a mere postscript [*Nachklappt*] which had to be included because John could not ignore this tradition nor yet could he fit it organically into his work'. So great' is John's emphasis on the divine glory of Jesus that, according to Käsemann, the fourth gospel has slipped into a 'naive docetism': [p. 33](#)

John [formulated who Jesus was and is] in his own manner. In so doing he exposed himself to dangers ... One can hardly fail to recognize the danger of his Christology of glory, namely, the danger of docetism. It is present in a still naive, unreflected form ...¹⁶

In sum, John 'was able to give an answer to the question of the centre of the Christian message only in the form of a naive docetism', Jesus' humanity really playing no role as it stands 'entirely in the shadow' of Jesus' glory as 'something quite non-essential'.¹⁷ 'In what sense', Käsemann asks, 'is he flesh, who walks on the water and through closed doors, who cannot be captured by his enemies, who at the well of Samaria is tired and desires a drink, yet has no need of drink and has food different from that which his disciples seek? ... How does all this agree with the understanding of a realistic incarnation?'¹⁸ He seriously doubts whether 'the "true man" of later incarnational theology becomes believable' in John's Christology.

¹³ I am indebted to Herman N. Ridderbos for calling my attention to this contrast between teacher and student. Cf. Ridderbos, 'The Word Became Flesh', *Through Christ's Word* (Translated by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.; Edited by W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd, III; Phillipsburg, New Jersey; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 3–22, especially p. 5.

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (translated by Gerhard Krodel from *Jesu letzter Wille nach Johannes 17*; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 9–10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 77; cf. his statement. 'The assertion, quite generally accepted today, that the Fourth Gospel is anti-docetic is completely unproven' (p. 26, fn. 41).

¹⁷ Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

¹⁸ Käsemann, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

What is one to say about Käsemann's opposite extreme to that of Bultmann? One can only applaud the emphasis here on the 'very God' character of Jesus, but surely Ridderbos is right when, commenting on [John 1:14](#), he writes:

'*Egeneto*, 'became', is not there for nothing. It is surely a matter of a new mode of existence. Also, not accidental is the presence of *sarx*, 'flesh', which ... indicates man in his weakness, vulnerability, and transiency. Therefore, it has been said, not incorrectly, that this statement ... certainly approximates the opposite of what one would expect if it were spoken of a docetic ... world of thought.¹⁹

Moreover, nowhere, is Jesus' humanity more apparent in a natural and unforced way than in John's gospel. Our Lord can grow weary from a journey, sit down at a well for a moment of respite, and ask for water. He calls Himself ([8:40](#)) and is called by others a man (*anthropōs*) many times ([4:29](#); [5:12](#); [7:46](#); [9:11](#), [16](#), [24](#); [10:33](#); [11:47](#); [18:17](#), [29](#); [19:5](#)). People know His father and mother ([6:42](#); [7:27](#); [1:45](#)). He can spit on the ground and make mud with His saliva ([9:6](#)). p. 34 He can weep over the sorrow Lazarus' death brings to Mary and Martha ([11:35](#)). He can be troubled (*hē psuchē mou tetaraktai*) as he contemplates His impending death on the cross ([12:27](#)). Here is clearly a *man*, for whom death was no friend, who could instinctively recoil against it as a powerful enemy to be feared and resisted. He can have a crown of thorns pressed down on His head ([19:2](#)) and be struck in the face ([19:3](#)). At His crucifixion (N.B.: he can die!) a special point²⁰ is made of the spear thrust in His side (cf. also *sōma*, that is, 'body' in [19:38](#), [40](#)), from which wound blood and water flowed forth ([19:34](#)). And after His resurrection on at least two occasions He shows His disciples His hands and feet, and even eats breakfast with them by the Sea of Galilee. Here is no docetic Christ! Clearly, in John's Christology we have to do with *sarx*, 'flesh', a man in weakness and vulnerability, a 'true man'. In Käsemann's interpretation of John's Jesus, while we certainly have to do with a Christology 'from above', the Christ therein is so 'wholly other' that His humanity is only a 'costume' and no part of a genuine Incarnation.

Where precisely does the biblical material in John lead us, however? (and here I turn to my own 'theologizing'). Does not a fair reading of John's testimony in its entirety yield up a Jesus who is true man, and yet at the same time One who is *more* (not other) than true man? And in what direction are we instructed to look for the meaning of this 'more than' save just the 'more than' of the deity of the Son of God, the One who was with God the Father in the beginning and who Himself was and is God ([John 1:1-3](#)), who 'for us men and for our salvation', without ceasing to be what He is, took into union with Himself at the virginal conception what He was not and became a man, and as the God-man entered the world from the body of a woman (cf. [Gal. 4:4](#))?

And what about Käsemann's suggestion that the fourth gospel's *theologia gloriae* so overpowers everything in its path that there is really no room in it for a *theologia crucis*, that John bring it in simply because he cannot ignore the tradition? I respectfully submit that such a perspective emanates from his own theological system rather than from exegesis and objective analysis. The *theologia crucis* fits as comfortably in John's Gospel

¹⁹ Ridderbos, *ibid.* p. 10. The reference in the last sentence is to the opinions of R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannes evangelium*, p. 244, and R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, I-XII, p. 24. But one could add almost indefinitely to this list the names of scholars who view John as self-consciously opposing docetism by his statement in [1:14](#), for example, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971) p. 102, and F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 39-40.

²⁰ Cf. [John 19:35](#): 'The man who saw it has given testimony, and his teaching is true.'

as it does in the Synoptics or elsewhere. It is introduced at the outset in the Forerunner's 'Behold the Lamb' ([1:26, 29](#)) and continues throughout as an integral aspect of John's Christology, for example, in the several references to the 'hour' that was to come upon Jesus ([2:4](#); [7:30](#); [8:20](#); [12:23](#); [13:1](#); [17:1](#)), in Jesus' [p. 35](#) Good Shepherd discourse where He reveals that He would lay down His life for the sheep ([10:11, 15](#)), and in His teaching of the grain of seed which must die ([12:24](#)).

It must be clearly seen that the implication in Käsemann's intimation that the dogma of a *divine* Saviour does violence to a theology of the *cross* mortally wounds Christianity as the redemptive religion of God at its very heart. Both Christ's deity and Christ's cross are essential to our salvation. But the implication of Käsemann's point is just to the opposite effect: that one can have a theology of glory or a theology of the cross, but one cannot have both simultaneously. But, I ask, do not these two stand as friends side by side throughout the New Testament? Paul, for example, whose theology is specifically a theology of the cross can, even as John, see precisely *in the cross* Christ's glory and triumph over the kingdom of darkness ([Col. 2:15](#)). The writer of Hebrews can affirm that it is precisely by *his death* that Jesus destroyed the devil and liberated those enslaved by the fear of death ([2:14-15](#)). Clearly, Käsemann's construction cannot be permitted to stand unchallenged for it plays one scriptural theme off over against a second equally scriptural theme which in no way is intrinsically contradictory to it.

Is there a sense, then, in light of all of this, in which we may legitimately speak of both kinds of Christologies—'from above' and 'from below'—in the gospels? I believe there is, but in the sense clarified by the great Princeton theologian, Benjamin B. Warfield, now over seventy-five years ago:

John's gospel does not differ from the other gospels as the gospel of the divine Christ in contradistinction to the gospels of the human Christ. All the gospels are gospels of the divine Christ ... But John's gospel differs from the other gospels in taking from the divine Christ its starting point. The others begin on the plane of human life. John begins in the inter-relations of the divine persons in eternity.

The Synoptic gospels all begin with the man Jesus, whom they set forth as the Messiah in whom God has visited his people; or rather, as himself, God come to his people, according to his promise. The movement in them is from below upward ... The movement in John, on the contrary, is from above downward. He takes his start from the Divine Word, and descends from him to the human Jesus in whom he was incarnated. This Jesus, says [sic] the others, is God. This God, says John, became Jesus.²¹ [p. 36](#)

By these last paragraphs I have illustrated what I think the theological task is and how it is to be fulfilled. Our task as theologians is simply to listen to, to seek to understand and to explicate what we hear in the holy Scriptures in their entirety for the health and benefit of the Church and in order to enhance the faithful propagation of the true gospel. With a humble spirit and the best use of grammatical/historical tools of exegesis we should draw out of Scripture, always being sensitive to all of its well-balanced nuances, the truth of God revealed therein.

If we are to imitate our Lord, His Apostles, and the New Testament Church, that and that alone is our task. As we do so, we are to wage a tireless war against any and every effort of the many hostile existentialistic and humanistic philosophies which abound about us to influence the results of our labours.

²¹ Benjamin B. Warfield, 'John's First Word', *The Westminster Teacher*, January, 1908; cited in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield* (edited by John E. Meeter; Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970). I. 148-149.

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Use of the Bible in Theology: A Case Study

Hans Walter Wolff

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Though coming out of a local theological debate, the following discussion on the use of the prophetic word of converting swords into plowshares has a profound as well as universal significance. Basing his arguments on scholarly and sound exegesis, the author convincingly demonstrates the need for the Church's unity to speak for disarmament as well as for a Christian life-style which is worthy of the one who went to the cross for the sake of reconciliation of man to God. The article takes up not only a burning issue of our time, namely, the question of war in an age of imminent nuclear holocaust, but also another burning issue in theology, namely a wholistic use of the Bible in developing a particular doctrine.

Editor

'Swords into plowshares'.—Several years ago young people of the church in the German Democratic Republic chose as their motto this phrase from the Old Testament prophets. They wore it, sewn upon their jackets and shirts, but this was immediately forbidden by the authorities. Yet this watchword quickly moved across the border into 'West Germany', where Christians who were members of the Peace Movement picked it up everywhere.

This prophetic word is not only made use of—even loved—by peace advocates, but it is also a matter of resolute controversy among theologians. In the face of the extreme threats to the future of the world, the lack of agreement on the meaning of this prophecy forbids us to remain silent on the matter. Rather, we ought to attempt to overcome the impasse, or lack of unity, in its interpretation. I shall attempt to make several exegetical observations which I hope will promote some unanimity in our understanding of the Christian's witness to the world.

For the sake of some methodological clarity, I begin with questions addressed to Prof. Trutz Rendtorff. In an interview with Professors Rendtorff and Dorothee Soelle, reported by the magazine *Der Spiegel* (Oct. 10, 1983, vol. 37, no. 41), Prof. Soelle made passing reference to the passage in Isaiah about 'beating swords into plowshares'. To this Prof. Rendtorff responded, 'Which prophet should we listen to, Prof. Soelle? Surely you know the word of the prophet Joel: "Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears" (Joel [p.38 3:10](#))? How do we resolve the dilemma of which biblical passage we should follow? We are not relieved of making our own individual decisions by reference to such texts.' The editor of *Der Spiegel* then asked: 'Who interprets the Christian teaching correctly, Prof. Soelle or Prof. Rendtorff?' Later, Rendtorff commented:

'You can surely see that also in theology different positions can be represented. But each individual must decide for himself. For my generation, this has been a theme of life.'

If I understand Trutz Rendtorff correctly in this interview, he intends to suggest in a preliminary way two things for consideration: (1) The Bible contradicts itself. Individual Bible passages do not help us to decide whether, according to Isaiah, peace will be secured through disarmament; or whether, according to Joel, arming for war, at least at certain times, protects against its dangers. The Bible provides evidence for both views. (2) The criteria for our decisions in such matters are to be found outside the Scripture. Therefore, Christians are unable to reach unanimity on such matters. Each person must arrive at his or her own decision, and also allow the decision of others to stand as valid.

JOEL 3 VERSUS ISAIAH 2?

Now, allow me to pose two methodological counter-questions. First, is not his opposing of [Isaiah 2](#) ('swords into plowshares') and [Joel 3](#) ('plowshares into swords') to be understood as a dramatic gesture in the discussion? Do we not agree that, for the genuine understanding of these texts, their context deserves attention?

How are we to interpret the reference in [Joel 3](#)? The context of [Joel 3:9–12](#) ([Heb. 4:9–12](#)) clearly indicates that the prophet proclaims Yahweh's judgment on the nations. Because nations of the world have severely mistreated Israel, the people of God (cf. [3:1–3](#)), they are all to bestir themselves and be gathered together before their judge (v. [12](#)). With biting sarcasm this gathering for punishment is characterized as an all-inclusive mobilization for war:

Proclaim this among the nations.
Prepare for a holy war!
arouse the warriors!
Let all the men of war draw near,
let them come up! (v. [9](#))

And then the entire war is turned into irony by the reversal of the passage in Isaiah:

Beat your plowshares into swords [p. 39](#)
and your pruning hooks into lances!
Let the weak say: 'I am a warrior'. (v. [10](#))
Come all you nations round about.

(But for what purpose? For a great war and victory? No!):

So that Yahweh may shatter your heroes ... (v. [11](#))
For there I (God, the Lord) will sit to judge
all the nations round about (v. [12](#)).

Here we find it blatantly stated that all military preparation—even when peaceful farming and vinedressing implements are turned into weapons, even when all the men are summoned, including the weaklings, untutored in war—is completely in vain. Thus, in principle, Joel chapter [3](#) by no means stands in contradiction to Isaiah chapter [2](#). Joel emphasizes with sarcasm that all military preparation must come before the judgment seat of God and be annihilated. The phrase 'plowshares into swords' makes a blunt mockery of the world powers, who think that by completely arming themselves with much effort they will have power and superiority over the people of God. Verse [16b](#) then adds:

But for his (weaponless) people Yahweh is a refuge,
and a stronghold for the people of Israel.

Once the context of the passage is correctly understood, we find not an opposition between [Joel 3](#) and [Isaiah 2](#), but instead in both texts the declaration of an end to the wars of the nations. It seems to me that, on the basis of these observations about the context, there can be agreement among us.

Second, how are we to evaluate Trutz Rendtorff's statement which emphasizes that each individual must make his or her own decisions? Is a person—including each Christian—really free to make up his or her own mind regarding military armaments, since our modern weaponry brings mankind closer to total self-destruction as never before? The slogan from Joel, 'plowshares into swords', by no means has the sense of a divine command to make military preparation, but rather is a divine judgment upon massive armaments. Surely, as always, we may not arbitrarily isolate a given passage from its context. But, as Christians, where else should we seek help for making decisions in these matters, if not in the entire kerygmatic intention of the Old and New Testaments? In view of military threats capable of annihilating the human race, where else should we Christians find an orientation for our 'yes' or 'no' than in the foundational concepts of the canon of our faith? So we want the endeavours of our biblical exegesis [p. 40](#) to arrive at a common understanding and decision about peace in our world. Of this I am certain: if we will listen to the biblical witness, there need not be a permanent split on matters of war and peace also in the church.

WAR AND PEACE

Before we investigate more closely the disputed meaning of the prophetic words 'swords into plowshares', and before we make at least a preliminary comparison of related themes in the New Testament, let us discuss the main themes connected with war in the Old Testament.

Ancient Israel was well-acquainted with the 'war-cry'. In 1916 Hermann Gunkel described Israel's 'war-like spirit' under the title 'Israelitisches Heldentum und Kriegsfroemmigkeit im Alten Testament' (Israelite Heroism and Martial Piety in the Old Testament). The nature and disposition of the ancient Israelites can hardly be distinguished from that of the neighbouring peoples, and, unfortunately, an even smaller distinction exists between the broadest streams of Christianity and the world, even in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we have been made more and more aware of a series of voices which indicate that in the 'flesh' of the Old Testament we encounter the 'spirit' of Israel's God. In several highly significant streams of tradition, even in the midst of the old words, we hear a new word, pointing toward the future, giving us hope and directing our path.

To begin with, I call attention to the narratives which attest to the so-called 'holy war', in which Israel, without any weapons, stands before its heavily-armed enemies, and then in a wondrous manner experiences the truth which Moses calls out to them in [Exodus 14:14](#):

Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still and astonished.

This is the way Israel experienced the Exodus, and so Israel's faith was founded and ever and again renewed. Later narratives attest to the same faith, as we find, for example, in the taking of Jericho ([Joshua 6](#): Jericho's walls collapsed without the use of any weapons, as the priests marched around the city with the ark, trumpets and shouting); or when,

according to [Judges 7](#), Midian was defeated (Israel's army, having been repeatedly reduced, used no weapons, but smashed jars, torches, and trumpets to put holy terror into the enemy, a terror which caused them to destroy themselves); or, when David fought Goliath ([1 Samuel 17](#): the giant Goliath, his sword, lance and spear notwithstanding, was defeated by the shepherd boy, who marched forth in the name of Yahweh of Hosts). Seen from an historical point of view these [p. 41](#) may have been quite insignificant experiences of deliverance from some difficulty, but Israel's faith had shaped them into a grand narrative in order to awaken new faith. In this way prophetic expectation about the future could look backwards into Israel's history.

Isaiah condemned the attempts of his contemporaries to find security through military power:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
who rely on horses.
They trust in chariots because they are many,
but they do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult Yahweh ([31:1-3](#)).
In returning and rest you shall be saved ([30:15](#)).

Israel's continued existence is never guaranteed by the usual deterrence of the enemy through fearsome armaments. Thus we find the prophet Hosea making an absolute contrast between military security and trust in Yahweh:

Assyria shall not save us,
we will not ride upon horses.
Nor will we any longer say 'our God'
to the work of our hands ([14:3](#)).

The notion that 'Yahweh destroys weapons' becomes one of the great themes of the Old Testament. [Psalm 46](#), a Song of Zion, puts it this way

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter,
... Yahweh of Hosts is with us.
Come, behold the works of Yahweh,
... He makes wars cease to the end of the earth:
He breaks the bow, shatters the spear,
and burns the chariots with fire (vv. [6-9](#)).

One cannot miss hearing in the Old Testament a decisive 'No' to every trust in any kind of weapons. Biblical faith decisively rejects all that has to do with war, not only in the outside world, but also in Israel! Entirely unambiguous is the new tone sounded in the midst of the Old Testament: faith in the God of Israel and security through military power are not compatible.

Alongside this 'No' to military weapons stands an equally clear 'Yes' to peace. Here I shall refer to a series of prophetic texts which we think of as messianic prophecies. Too little attention has been paid to the fact that all of these texts proclaim peace as well as a coming Messiah. [p. 42](#) We shall examine the most important prophecies, which strengthen the expectation that something new is coming into the world, which will nullify the old rules of war, whereby one group or nation was pitted against another.

In [Isaiah 9](#), God is given praise first of all because he—once again—has overcome military oppression (v. [4](#)) and destroyed the last traces of the soldiers' equipment (v. [5](#)) in preparation for handing over sovereign authority to the Messiah. The Messiah himself,

however, is given the lordly titles of 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (v. 6). The primary accent apparently rests on the last title, for the coming ruler is enthroned only so that 'peace without end' can be established. The pedestal upon which his throne rests is called 'justice and righteousness'.

The promise in [Isaiah 11](#) goes into more detail about the instruments the Messiah will use to bring about and maintain peace:

He will smite the violent with the rod of his mouth
and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked (v. 4).

Thus it is exclusively 'word' and 'spirit' which are used by the Messiah to stop those who commit deeds of violence. The power of his words and the authority of his spirit do away with injustice, the source of discord. The Messiah offers care and concern especially for those who are weak and have few legal rights.

In addition to this peace which society will enjoy, vv. 6–8 speak of an unprecedented ecological peace:

The infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, ...
The wolf shall live with the sheep,
and the leopard shall live with the kid.

This messianic ecology amazes us. The narrow confines within which we usually envision the development of a future peace are widened through fables and leave quickly behind the sphere of what is humanly possible. In [Isaiah 11:10](#) the messianic age is also described in terms of world peace:

The root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign for the peoples.
Him shall the nations seek.

The Messiah is the last refuge to whom the peoples can turn with their problems. In [Micah 5:5a](#) it can even be said of the Messiah: 'He shall be the peace' (or: 'he will bring about peace' [?]) and, indeed, even 'unto the ends of the earth' (v. 4b). He will be the son of the small town of Bethlehem, which never mustered a significant number of p. 43 troops for the Israelite army ('little among the thousands of Judah', v. 2). He will conduct his office as a shepherd (v. 4: 'he will feed his flock in the strength of Yahweh'). There is no mention of any kind of military weaponry.

[Zechariah 9:9–10](#) is very clear on this point, and goes further by adding three additional ideas. (1) Although the Messiah himself is proclaimed also as a king ('Behold, your king comes to you!'), the traditional picture of a king is completely changed. Lacking power of any kind, he is even described as 'poor and needy'. He does not ride upon a charger (an animal of war), but upon an ass, indeed, the weak foal of an ass (the animal of the common people). (2) This king, himself weaponless, will disarm his own people:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem,
and he will break the battle bow (v. 10).

Those who are most closely connected with this king (Ephraim, Jerusalem), his own people, are the first to be disarmed. (3) Finally, he will 'command peace to the nations'; indeed, this peace will encompass the world ('from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth').

Now let us summarize: The expectation of a Messiah belongs inseparably with the hope for an end to war, the destruction of weapons, and the establishment of peace

between nations, including social justice. When the disciples of Jesus called their master the Christ, i.e., the Messiah, they hardly could have been unaware of these motifs from messianic prophecy. Does not the passage in [Ephesians 2:14](#), 'He is our peace', recall [Micah 5:5a](#) and [Isaiah 9:6-7](#)? Is it not true that the hymnic praise of the inaugurator of peace is at the heart and centre of messianic thinking?

But what is the relationship of the one whom Jesus' disciples saw as 'their peace' and peace for the nations? At this point we must turn our attention, unhurriedly and with exegetical precision, to the prophetic text from which the catchphrase 'swords and plowshares' is taken.

AN INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH 2 AND MICAH 4

Our passage is the most significant promise for Jerusalem on the theme of world peace that is known in the Old Testament. In this particular text are combined the most important elements of tradition concerning the theme 'war and peace'. This prophecy comes down to us in two similar, almost verbally identical literary traditions, in [Isaiah 2:2-4](#) P. 44 and [Micah 4:1-3](#). In their present literary compositions, both passages are attached immediately to older prophecies which threaten Zion with devastating blows of destruction, a destruction which surely had already taken place by the time of this prophetic word of promise. This promise is to be regarded as 'eschatological' in the strict sense of the term. It reckons with a great change in the world. Mount Zion and the temple of Yahweh, which had become an expanse of ruins, will in the end range above all mountaintops of the world. The nations of the world, until then in conflict, will stream to Zion for universal instruction through the word of Yahweh. And thus the prevailing world politics will be put to an unequivocal and final end.

Nation shall not lift up sword against nation
neither shall they learn war any more

([Isaiah 2:4](#)).

The introductory formula 'And it shall come to pass in the latter days' (RSV) is meant to be understood in an eschatological sense. The Septuagint correctly rendered the eschatological expression, as did the Vulgate (*in novissimo dierum*). I translate 'But in days to come, at the passing of this age', because the text refers less to the 'last days' (Luther) or the 'end' (thus the German *Einheitsuebersetzung*) of the present age than it does to the age which is presently still hidden, a time which is entirely new. In the post-exilic literature we find the expression 'in the latter days' more frequently used to characterize a change of fortune, especially for hostile nations ([Jeremiah 48:47; 49:39](#)) and, indeed, for all peoples ([Ezekiel 38:16](#)). Evidence for an early post-exilic date of the prophetic promise in [Isaiah 2/Micah 4](#) is also found in the word-statistics and the new thematic connection of older traditions.

We turn now to the structure of the basic text as it has been handed down similarly in the books of Isaiah and Micah. We may distinguish between three strophes.

The first strophe consists of [Isaiah 2:2](#) and [Micah 4:1](#), including in each instance the first three words of the following verse. In three double-triplets (3+3), the first strophe announces the vision of the surpassing height of the temple-mount in Jerusalem and streaming of the nations to it:

But in the days to come, at the passing of this age,
the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established as the highest of mountains.
It shall be raised up above the hills.

To it will flow (all) peoples (nations) and the multitudes of the nations (peoples) will come. p. 45

The second strophe consists of the continuation of the third verse of Isaiah and the second of Micah. It offers a report of un-named nations summoning one another to make the pilgrimage to Zion.

They say:
'Come, let us go to the mountain of Yahweh,
to the house of the God of Jacob.'

They expect that Yahweh's voice will provide them with instruction; this is made emphatic by a brief verse formulated as a double-doublet (2+2).

That he may teach us his ways,
and that we may walk in his paths.

Then another double-triplet (3+3) speaks of the fulfilment of this expectation that the word of Yahweh will come forth out of Zion:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.

The third strophe (v. 4 in Isaiah; v. 3 in Micah) contains the specific promise of the word of Yahweh, which is the particular scopus of this great prophetic text. Indeed, we read for the first time a conciliatory statement about justice from Yahweh:

He will make conciliation between (Micah: many) peoples (nations),
give justice for numerous nations (peoples) (Micah: afar off).

Two further double-triplets express the effects of peace among the peoples, namely, the transforming of weapons into peaceful implements, and the end both of war and the study of war:

Then they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
No longer shall nation lift up sword against nation
nor shall they learn war anymore.

The Hebrew texts in Isaiah and Micah exhibit small variants when compared with one another. Such variations suggest that there was a lively oral tradition which handed on this great prophetic promise. (An early example of the modern popularity of this pericope!) A most significant addition occurs in [Micah 4:4](#). Whereas the basic text in Micah—almost identical with that in Isaiah—speaks of overcoming the conflict among nations, this later addition in v. 4 draws the consequences for the peaceful individual life which is to be hoped for. The idyllic sketch presented in this verse departs from the context, and with its lines of four stresses each, is also rhythmically different: p. 46

They shall sit everyman under his vine and under his fig tree—
and no one shall be afraid.
For the mouth of Yahweh of Hosts has spoken.

In post-exilic times such words were also used to portray the golden age of peace during Solomon's reign ([1 Kings 5:5](#); cf. [2 Kings 18:31](#)) as a time of security, free from the dangers of war; as a life of joy (cf. [1 Kings 4:20](#) with [5:5](#)) and neighbourly friendship

([Zechariah 3:10](#): 'In that day everyone of you will invite his neighbour under his vine and under his fig tree'). No terror disturbs a sociable, serene community life. By the addition of v. [4](#) the universal promise of this prophetic text is reinterpreted in terms derived from the sphere of intimate peasant life.

A different sort of addition to the unconditional promise of peace just noted in [Micah 4:4](#) are those expansions which are not a part of the promise, but instead draw conclusions which are for the purpose of offering helpful orientation for a present crisis. The additions occur in Isaiah ([2:5](#)) as well as in Micah ([4:5](#)), but each differs considerably from the other. This, once again, may indicate a lively oral tradition through the recitation of these words in the worship service.

Let us begin with the shorter, more prosaic text in Isaiah. To the grand, three-strophied promise an admonition has been attached which is meant to address the then present audience:

O house of Jacob!
Come and let us walk
in the light of Yahweh (v. [5](#)).

One cannot fail to recognize the connection of the wording with the previous verses. The address 'house of Jacob' recalls v. [3](#), according to which the peoples are to go up to the 'house of the God of Jacob'. Similarly, the exhortation 'Come and let us walk in the light of Yahweh' picks up the language of the summons with which the peoples call to one another: 'Come and let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh'. It also takes up the wording of the expectation that is expressed in v. [3a](#): 'that we may walk in his paths'. Other early post-exilic texts about Jerusalem also speak about walking 'in the light of Yahweh'; indeed, these texts speak not only of the 'peoples' ([Isaiah 60:3](#)), but also of Israel ([Isaiah 60:1-3, 19](#); cf. [Micah 7:8](#); [Psalms 56:14](#); [89:16](#); [27:1](#)).

Now it is to be noted that the grand promise (vv. [2-4](#); also [Micah 4:1-3](#)) spoke not of Israel, but of the peoples inclusively and of their relationship to the house and the word of Yahweh. On the other hand, now the leader in liturgical worship summons in v. [5](#) only the [p. 47](#) worshippers in Jerusalem, as 'House of Jacob', to walk in Yahweh's light. What else can this mean than that the Israelite hearers already now should follow the instructions of Yahweh, which at a future time will lead all peoples to peace with one another (vv. [3-4](#))? Thus the eschatological promise for the peoples has become a word to help give direction for Israel for the present.

That such a summons belongs to a crisis in the orientation of the life of the people of God is made even more clear when we examine the corresponding passage in [Micah 4:5](#). For in this verse the difference at that time between the world of the nations, on the one hand, and Israel, on the other, is made explicit. At the same time, the non-fulfilment of the promise of peace among nations stands in contrast with Israel's accomplishment of obedience to God.

All the peoples walk
each in the name of its god.
But we will walk
in the name of Yahweh,
our God for ever and ever.

The connection between v. [5](#) and vv. [1-4](#) in Micah has until now been given too little attention. The difficulty is related to the meaning of the conjunction which connects v. [5](#) with vv. [1-4](#). Usually the particle is translated in the casual sense as 'for'. It is thus translated in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as well as in the older Luther translation, the

Zuercher Bibel (1954), the Jerusalem Bible (1968), and unfortunately also now in the Unified Translation (*Einheitsuebersetzung*, 1980). Such a translation of the particle makes the significance of the connection of v. [5](#) with vv. [1-4](#) completely unclear, for the declaration in v. [5](#) can just as little serve as a motivation for vv. [1-4](#) as does the exhortation in [Isaiah 2:5](#) for vv. [2-4](#). It is probably for this reason that the revised Luther translation of 1964 leaves the conjunction untranslated—an unsatisfactory solution offered out of embarrassment.

But the connection between v. [5](#) and the preceding context becomes quite clear if we understand the conjunction to have a concessive meaning ('although', 'even if', 'notwithstanding'), as Th. C. Vriezen has convincingly demonstrated (cf. for example [Isaiah 54:10](#), 'Although the mountains depart and the hills be removed, my steadfast love shall never depart from you ...'; cf. also [Isaiah 51:6](#); [Proverbs 6:35](#)). Thus the connection of v. [5](#) with the preceding word of promise becomes clear. It may be paraphrased:

Even though all peoples go
 (their own way) p. 48
 each in the name of its god,
we ourselves go
 (even now our own way)
 in the name of Yahweh, our God,
 for ever and ever.

Thus we have here a confessional statement, which the worshipping community speaks in the first person plural, and which is solemnly concluded with a liturgical expression ('for ever and ever', as in [Psalm 45:18](#); [145:21](#), etc.). This confession, in relation to the preceding words of promise, precisely corresponds in substance to the exhortation in [Isaiah 2:5](#). But it points more clearly to the spiritual crisis for Israel in order to lead it away from this to an unequivocal action of the worshipping community. The universal promise, according to which all nations will be at peace by walking in the ways of Yahweh, is at that time completely unfulfilled. The nations of the world do not yet think about directing their lives in accordance with the word of Yahweh. But the community of Yahweh even now should ([Isaiah 2:5](#)) and will ([Micah 4:5](#)) obey his instructions and his word; even now it is to make its swords into plowshares and not learn war anymore. So the worshippers of Yahweh even now are to walk on the path which is promised for all peoples for the days that are to come. Even now!—although Mount Zion does not by any means tower over all the mountain peaks of the world. Even now!—although the nations still follow their gods of war. The way of Yahweh is the only lasting way, the path that leads to what is ultimate and final, the path which also all people must tread in the future.

In the light of these considerations, several questions arise which I would like to put to Wolfhart Pannenberg and his article 'Swords into Plowshares—the Meaning and Misuse of a Prophetic Word'.

1. Pannenberg correctly states that the prophecy about 'Beating your swords into plowshares' is not found in the context of a direct political challenge; rather, it belongs to an eschatological vision. Nevertheless, did not our exegetical observations convince us that this form critical analysis of the context is yet incomplete? The present literary context of the promise makes it apply to the contemporary times of a new audience, with the exhortation to the House of Jacob that it should even now walk and act in the light of Yahweh ([Isaiah 2:5](#)). Our analysis further showed that in [Micah 4:5](#) there is a corresponding clarification of the divine will that, unlike the nations, the House of Jacob is to act even now according to Yahweh's will for peace. Does this not fully justify the use

of this passage by the Protestant youth in [p. 49](#) the German church? Indeed, does it not unambiguously require it for the worshipping community which hears these words?

2. Pannenberg refers in his article to [Isaiah 2:5](#) and suggests that the prophetic vision, with its reference to law ([Isaiah 2:3](#)), could become a certain signpost in our own historical situation. However, does not this restriction of focus on the concept of law in the passage arbitrarily diminish the contemporary significance of the text's content and meaning? Pannenberg's admonition to work on international law is of course useful. But does it in fact correspond to the content of the text? The expectation voiced in the text points ahead not to the law as such, but to the fact that Yahweh judges the nations; that Yahweh's word and instruction will lead to peace. In this passage those who hear the word of God have a question put to them for the present as well as for the future. And what about the consequences which the text draws? Those who hear these words are to transform their weapons into implements of peace; they are to stop learning about and declaring war. As a consequence of Yahweh's mediating and judging of nations, it is apparent that the decision to beat swords into plowshares cannot be evaded. The direction things are to take is unambiguous. Any alternative to this, especially in the direction of building modern weapons capable of annihilating humankind, is surely not to be found here or among the many related Old or New Testament texts. Surely it is most urgent that we work toward an international legal agreement on disarmament, but such acts of conciliation ought not to take the place of what is proclaimed here as the consequences that Yahweh's word wants to call forth. As people who listen to the God of the biblical witnesses, must we not take upon ourselves the rigorous requirements of a special and proleptic, one-sided life of peace, as this text and many of the words of Jesus and the apostles teach us in the New Testament?

3. I hope that I have been able to convince Professor Pannenberg that the confession in [Micah 4:5](#) has great significance for the broader understanding of this prophetic text and for the problem of its misuse. In this passage the conduct of the nations in those days and the community of Yahweh is clearly distinguished. This clarity of distinction is completely absent in Pannenberg's article. In [Micah 4:5](#) the people of God clearly perceive that the nations for the time being are a long way from hearing God's word, which can help them achieve peace. But this cannot and should not hinder the worshippers in Zion from following already the ways of their God, in the certainty that the ways of God are the ultimate and final path which, sooner or later, the nations must also tread. But how does this expected action of [p. 50](#) God's people relate to Pannenberg's ideas that 'we must hold fast to the principle of mutuality, to the conception of mutual obligations, even when it has to do with questions of disarmament'? The community spoken about in [Micah 4:5](#), in the midst of a world crisis, confesses its faith that it must already work unilaterally for that peace which the nations in general did not yet practice. Pannenberg thinks that even during a time of nuclear armament 'peace can be attained and guaranteed only on the basis of mutual give and take, and thus on the basis of political agreement'. Is this conception of mutuality representative of biblical thought if, as we read elsewhere, 'to give is more blessed than to receive'? In any case, it is not compatible with [Micah 4:5](#).

In my opinion, the fear of a misunderstanding and a misapplication of this prophecy is justified only when the watchword 'Swords into plowshares' is banned from the historical present of the worshipping community and its members and their public actions, and is relegated to an indefinite, far-off future for the nations (or else applied to a spiritual inwardness). One can ask, in the light of present-day Christianity, whether the negotiations of the major powers would not be more successful for achieving world peace, if the politicians who want to be Christians would allow a more unequivocal impact of this

prophetic word upon their work. In any case, there remains the question about what it is that specifically distinguishes Christian actions in this matter.

4. We have examined a prophetic text which occurs twice in Israel's literary tradition and which exhibits several variations and interpretations in its oral transmission. This prophecy not only takes up those strands of tradition which allowed a new theme to break forth in the midst of the war-cry in ancient Israel (we noted above the experience of faith in narratives about the wars of Yahweh; the theme 'Yahweh destroys weapons' in Zion Psalms; the prophetic condemnation of self-security through the politics of military power; and the connection of messianic expectation with a hope for peace); it also stands in a relationship to New Testament texts, which we must now seek to determine. In conclusion, let us ask whether the New Testament, in the light of the life and activity of the followers of Jesus, at some point reflects the meaning and the spirit of our prophetic text; and whether the New Testament does not disclose even more the ultimate basis for the text.

SOME NEW TESTAMENT PARALLELS

According to [Romans 12](#), with the appearance of Jesus Christ the [p. 51](#) eschaton of the mercy of God has entered into our history. Accordingly, the community of Jesus' followers is not to be conformed to this world; rather, in its reasonable worship, the community should repay no one evil for evil (cf. vv. 17:21!). This means: 'If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all' (v. [18](#)). 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (v. [21](#)). The First Letter of Peter reckons with the fact that the Christian community, like its Lord, will experience suffering. The letter reminds the community that its conduct should conform to the example of Christ, who 'when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly' ([2:21-24](#)). Jesus' disciples, according to [Luke 9:51-54](#) were inclined to let 'fire from heaven' fall upon their enemies (v. [54](#)). 'But Jesus rebuked them and said: "Do you not know what manner of spirit you are of?"' Do not all of these passages from different areas within the New Testament point in the direction of our prophetic text? Do they not make clear the meaning, the spirit, and the essential foundation of our deeds and actions?

Now, it can be said that, considered sociologically and also in the light of their political problems, the New Testament followers of Jesus are comparable neither to ancient Israel, nor to our national churches, large denominations, nor to the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century. But concerning this, let me ask two questions.

1. In the midst of our human and political problems, must not the church today—if it is to be, remain, or become the church of Jesus Christ—hold fast to the apostolic exhortation, as did early Christianity: 'Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ' ([Philippians 1:27](#); cf. [Colossians 1:10](#))?

2. Does not the church of today in many respects stand closer socio-politically to the problems of Old Testament Israel than it does to the New Testament community?

Thus we may draw the conclusion that a prophetic text such as [Isaiah 2](#)/[Micah 4](#) elucidates and makes concrete for us our responsibilities, though the final basis for our actions is laid in the New Testament.

It is said that everyone wants peace. What is disputed among us is the way to achieve peace: occasional threats with weapons that annihilate humanity, or immediate disarmament. Is there a clearer help for Christians in their decision-making than the prophetic passage about 'turning swords into plowshares', supported by other theological traditions proclaimed in the Old Testament, and by further motivations found in the New Testament? It would be an immeasurable gain if the [p. 52](#) churches of the world would

become more and more unified on this point. There are certainly no significant words of the prophets, of the Apostles, or of Jesus, which point in any other direction than the prophetic text, 'beat your swords into plowshares'. I ask you: if we listen to God's word of reconciliation and if we look to the way of Jesus' cross, must there still be a parting of our ways? No! Nor should this be the case when our encounter with this prophetic word is similar to what Mark Twain once wrote: 'It is the Bible passages which I understand that give me a stomach ache, not those that I don't understand.' 'Beat your swords into plowshares'—that is easy to understand.

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The Evolution of Evangelical Mission Theology since World War II

Arthur F. Glasser

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With his vast experience and expertise in missions and missionary theology, Arthur Glasser traces the major phases in the development of Evangelical Missiology in the last half century in a convincing manner. His concluding challenge—'If evangelicals are to develop an adequate Trinitarian Mission theology based on the Kingdom of God, they must face up to the implication of the Ecumenical problem: What must we do with those whose confession of Jesus Christ we must take seriously yet, whose perspectives on the christian mission differ markedly from our own?'—will shake up any conscientious reader. The article is particularly beneficial as it gives insights concerning the historical development of a particular area of theology.

Editor

Howard Snyder stands taller and sees further than many evangelical writers today. Having been a missionary in the third world (Brazil) gives him considerable insight into the contemporary scene. Not only is he biblical through and through. His theologizing is disciplined reflection on the total witness of the Bible on the basic issues facing the church in our day. As a result, what he writes I read, and when he speaks I listen.

In 1983, at a Conference at Colorado Springs, Colorado, I heard him discuss the significance of Jesus Christ's preoccupation with the kingdom of God. Snyder then went on to relate this to the present need of the church. I was fascinated. But it was his initial statement that particularly grasped my attention. Without qualification he introduced his presentation with the following judgment: 'The recent partial recovery among evangelicals of the kingdom of God theme is surely one of the most significant theological developments of this decade—perhaps of this century.' This brought me to a full stop. But I heartily agreed!

In this article I shall seek to show the defensibility of this statement. I shall do this by tracing the post-war evolution of evangelical perspectives on the theology of the Christian mission. 'Evolution' of evangelical theology? You know how tricky it is even to attempt a definition of 'evangelical'. And when have evangelicals ever admitted that their theologizing reflects 'evolution' (that very bad word!)? From [p. 54](#) Tübingen's Olympian heights Peter Beyerhaus discerns at least six different kinds of evangelicals (Bosch 1980:30). But even he would be hard put to judge where the midstream of their theologizing exists, whether among the separatist dispensationalists, or the traditional orthodox, or the neo-evangelicals.

Hence, while I beg your indulgence, I shall attempt to indicate successively the shifts in thought and emphasis that seem (to me, at least) to have characterized the evangelical debate on mission theology since 1947, when, according to Max Warren, those who met at Whitby (International Missionary Council) were hopeful 'that the most testing days of the Christian mission, at least in our generation, lay behind us' (Goodall 1953:40).

AFFIRMING THE GREAT COMMISSION (PLUS 'FOLLOW-UP')

The only significant student gatherings on the mission of the church in the first decade after World War II were triennially convened by the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) at the University of Illinois (Urbana). In the late 1940s and early 1950s their mission theology had but one burning theme: the Great Commission ([Mt. 28:18-20](#)). Even though the worldwide political scene drastically changed during this period, none of the leaders of these gatherings saw fit to broaden this biblical focus. Colonial empires were breaking down, communists were triumphing in East Asia, and the Korean War was trying the West, but no matter. And this despite Max Warren's solemn warning (at the International Missionary Council gathering in Willingen, 1952) that 'we know with complete certainty that the most testing days of the Christian mission in our generation lie just ahead' (Goodall 1953:40).

However, evangelicals remained unmoved. Whereas they sought to heed Jesus' word not to be alarmed by deteriorating world conditions ([Mt. 24:6](#)), they did not respond to his injunction to be creatively responsive to 'the signs of the times' ([Lk. 12:56](#)). They also largely perceived the missionary task in terms of evangelism. So far as they were concerned, the world had yet to be fully evangelized. Their personal, liberating encounter with Jesus Christ gave them but one desire: to share him with all those making up their generation. Furthermore, Jesus' final wish, expressed as a command, was that they 'make disciples of all nations'. I can still recall how the Bible addresses at those IVCF student gatherings were largely taken up with personal discipleship, not with anything approximating a comprehensive mission theology. And as for the revolutionary changes upsetting the status quo of the world, the typical comment was: 'So what, hasn't the [p. 55](#) world always been in a mess?' Then would follow the clincher: 'What Christ has commanded we must obey! No disciple of his can be indifferent to the missionary mandate!'

Nothing seemed to catch the imagination so much as the individualism reflected in Edward M. Bounds's memorable salvo: 'Men are God's method. The church is looking for better methods; God is looking for better men' (1963:5). Obviously, an elaborate theology of mission was not felt necessary. What counted was personal discipleship: the sort of devotion to Christ that made one a faithful witness to his gospel, particularly in those places where he was largely unknown.

This emphasis on discipleship was greatly strengthened and popularized by the Navigator emphasis on 'follow-up'. During the war many American service personnel

came under the spell of Dawson Trotman and this movement. When Billy Graham increasingly began using Navigator personnel and methods in his crusades to establish new converts in the faith, it became increasingly apparent to even his most relentless critics that permanent results were indeed being achieved. However, this rigorous Navigator additive only confirmed to many the truncated and individualistic nature of evangelical Christianity. Something else was needed.

DISCOVERING CHURCH GROWTH (PLUS THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS)

My own missionary experience as a member of a large, multinational and interdenominational society (the China Inland Mission) from 1945 to 1951, and followed by four intense years teaching a growing number of missionary volunteers (Columbia Bible College) from 1952 to 1955, were largely shaped by the emphases just described. Our preoccupation was with ardour rather than method, and the texts we used stressed Christology and soteriology, rarely ecclesiology. In China my evangelistic activity was initially among the Chinese and was only marginally related to the deliberate outreach of local congregations. I never heard anyone discuss the need for devising plans to increase the membership growth of existing congregations or to multiply the number of congregations in populous areas. Such strategizing would have been regarded as unspiritual. Our concern was to focus the energies of Christians on their own spiritual development that they might be vigorous and authentic in their witness to Christ. We did not critically evaluate our work; our ministry was indifferent to measurable results. After all, God alone gave what increase we enjoyed ([1 Cor. 3:6](#)). **P. 56**

Later, I found myself in the midst of a tribal-people movement in which the emergence of new congregations was a significant reality. But no one suggested that we analyze the reasons for this phenomenon. All were agreed that it too was totally of God.

Donald A. McGavran called a halt to all this in 1955 with his epochal work, *The Bridges of God*. Slowly at first, but increasingly, evangelicals began to talk of 'church growth'. This stimulated the beginnings of evangelical theologizing. True, many had read Roland Allen, Johannes Bavinck, Robert Glover, A. J. Gordon, Arthur T. Pierson, and others, but it was McGavran who pressed us to 'think church'. He argued that the key to worldwide evangelization was the multiplication of churches, not the multiplication of evangelists. Yet, even though he eventually made a massive impact on evangelicals worldwide, as late as 1976 his perspectives were still struggling for acceptance. In that year *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* appeared, written by a highly respected evangelical, J. Herbert Kane. It soon became a widely used text in evangelical schools worldwide, although only ten pages are devoted to the role of the church, and even these pages are devoid of any specific discussion of its essence, structure, or functions in terms of mission outreach.

Those who began to listen to McGavran, however, started to concentrate on the growth and multiplication of local congregations. This was God's will: a chief and irreplaceable element in mission praxis. At first the focus was almost entirely methodological, but eventually this stimulated the beginnings of a reflection on the church as a reality in its own right. The new thesis was: when any particular church ceases to grow in an area where other churches are growing, something fundamental has been lost in its very essence as the people of God in the midst of the nations. Increasingly, the closing clause of the Great Commission came into focus. Converts must not only be 'taught to observe' all that Jesus had commanded. They must be baptized—and this pointed in the direction of their entrance into the life, worship, witness, and service of the local congregation.

Evangelicals both within and outside the conciliar churches (World Council of Churches-oriented) flocked to hear McGavran. The Church Growth movement began to take shape and multitudes began to struggle with the new terminology: homogeneous units, Class II leaders, people movements, transfer growth, resistance-receptivity axis, redemption and lift, harvest theology, and so forth. The list keeps growing.

A new stream of input came into the midst of this church-growth ferment, through a journal subsidized by the American Bible Society p. 57 called *Practical Anthropology*. Growing numbers of evangelical anthropologists began using it as a vehicle for promoting cultural sensitivity and exposing the mono-cultural stance and culture blindness of the missionary movement. Charles Kraft, Eugene Nida, Kenneth Pike, William Reyburn, William Smalley, and many others slowly awakened missionaries to the possibility of receiving help from the social sciences in their efforts to understand the nature of culture, cross-cultural communication, leadership selection and training, revitalization movements, and the like. Looking back, one can confidently affirm that in the three decades since *Bridges* appeared, evangelicals have been increasingly using these insights to probe every aspect of the church—its decay as well as its growth.

Indeed, since 1955 a significant literature has been produced on church growth as well as mission anthropology. Some missionaries even began to tackle the task of developing an integrated mission theology that was consistently biblical. Johannes Blauw gave unexpected impetus to this with his 1962 survey of the biblical theology of mission: *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. But it took Charles Van Engen's massive study, *The Growth of the True Church* (1981) to convince evangelicals that a biblical ecclesiology could be married to church-growth theory. The writings of such evangelicals as Peter Beyerhaus, Harry Boer, David Bosch, Orlando Costas, Richard De Ridder, John Stott, and Johannes Verkuyl helped along the way.

CHALLENGED BY ECUMENISTS (AND BY THE CHINA WITHDRAWAL)

At the beginning of the 1960s evangelicals were only marginally interested in the ecumenical movement. The dwindling commitment of its member churches to evangelism as biblically defined, and to mission as traditionally understood—'where there are no Christians there ought to be Christians, and where there are no churches there ought to be churches'—made evangelicals less than curious as to what was emanating from Geneva. Furthermore, the radicalization of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1960s, paralleled by signs of the growing vigour of evangelicals, confirmed to many that they were on the right track. But were they taking the full measure of what was happening in the world? I was personally baffled over the lack of interest of many in the sober lessons I thought God was seeking to teach arising from the missionary encounter with communism in China and our subsequent withdrawal from that country. Not a few in mainline churches seemed to care, although I became impatient with those conciliar churchpeople who wrote off the whole China mission p. 58 as a massive failure—nothing less than the judgment of God. But what provoked me more was their suggestion that the whole missionary movement come to an end, the sooner the better.

In the midst of the growing radicalization of the 1960s, evangelicals began to receive new insights, and these came from surprising quarters. Pope John XXIII and Vatican II shattered the long-held stereotype that Rome was incapable of change, and that it will never grant its members the freedom to study the Scriptures. On the other hand, the radicalization of the WCC (Geneva 1966, Uppsala 1968, and Bangkok 1973) confirmed the darkest thoughts we had of the future of the WCC.

Yet not entirely. Believe it or not, many evangelicals are not solely activists. Many read. Although the probability is that their own publications are largely read by their own constituencies, many evangelical leaders are likely to be up on the literature of their opposite numbers in the WCC. They know something about such writers as Wilhelm Andersen, Gerald Anderson, José Miguez Bonino, Ferdinand Hahn, Johannes Hoekendijk, Kosuke Koyama, Paul Loeffler, Hans Margull, Paul Minear, Stephen Neill, Lesslie Newbigin, Eugene Smith, Bengt Sundkler, John Taylor, George Vicedom, and Max Warren. And they are somewhat knowledgeable of such Roman Catholics as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Hans Küng, Aylward Shorter, Thomas Stransky, and others. These lists are merely representative. But it was through these authors that some evangelicals began to sit up and take notice, for not a few of the authors wrote with genuine evangelical concern. Furthermore, they often showed themselves remarkably at home in the Scriptures, and the passages they used were often those that evangelicals tended to overlook. A case in point: when the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism delegates met in Melbourne (1980) under the rubric 'Your Kingdom Come', they used passages from the synoptic Gospels. When evangelicals met a few weeks later in Pattaya, Thailand, their motif was 'How Shall They Hear?' And their focus was on the Pauline epistles. This dichotomy and polarization seemed strange. Was it theologically necessary? Actually, during the 1960s some evangelicals were beginning to wonder whether they were really listening to the total witness of Scripture, or not. Had they been preoccupied with an 'evangelical canon' within the larger corpus of revealed truth?

STRUGGLING FOR A HOLISTIC GOSPEL (AND LISTENING TO THE MENNONITES)

When I joined the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary in the fall of **p. 59** 1969, I found the atmosphere anything but tranquil. War in Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement, and the confrontational tactics of the students, all challenged evangelical preoccupation with evangelism, discipleship training, and church growth. Among those who welcomed me was one who conveyed the 'official' suggestion that I do what I could to 'get some Bible into that Church Growth movement!' Although administrative duties largely absorbed my time, I felt I should review all that evangelicals had written on mission and social responsibility. This largely drew a blank. The evangelical 'right' was fearful of publishing anything that might be interpreted as even a whiff of the long-discredited 'social gospel'. (An innocuous article that I wrote in *Freedom Now* [January 1969], stressing the importance of evangelical social concern, was dismissed as 'favourable toward this deadly menace' by the then chairman of the Board of Trustees of San Francisco Baptist Theological Seminary [*Faith*, May/June 1974, pp.7-9].)

Understandably, evangelicals had long since dismissed the old liberal ethic as bankrupt. Its political and social philosophy had not stood the test of time. It had proved itself both naive and impractical. Its mission theory reduced the gospel to a social message and the church to a mere social institution. This resulted from its nonrecognition of the fall and its unwillingness to accept the absolute necessity either of Christ's vicarious atonement or of the new birth—if one is to see, much less enter, the kingdom of God (see Walhout 1963:519-20).

The only consistent breath of relevant evangelical insight into social responsibility seemed to be coming from the public witness and hardworking pens in the Mennonite tradition. The Mennonites alone seemed to have escaped an encapsulated, individualistic evangelicalism as well as the reduction of the gospel to a vapid 'Christian' humanism. But why did not the writing of Guy Hershberger, Paul Peachey, and John Howard Yoder

include creative approaches to evangelism and church growth, at home and abroad? Only later, with the appearance of *Mission Focus* in 1972, did we begin to sense the breadth and depth of their missionary concern. In contrast, the writings of Reformed theologians stressed the Lordship of Christ over all of life yet seemed only marginally concerned with the urgency of the unfinished evangelistic task.

At this point, evangelicals here and there began to fall back on what proved to have acceptable missiological credentials, if one was to judge by the standards of Gustav Warneck (1834–1910). He believed that the *Kulturbefehl* should have a central place in mission thought and practice (see Kasdorf 1976:54–67). Among others, I had been preaching and writing on my growing understanding of this theme p. 60 ('The Cultural Mandate', e.g., Horner 1968:178–88), contending that evangelicals were remiss in their handling of Scripture if they neglected what it had to say about life in this world. The Bible is not solely a revelation of redemption. Actually, two streams of obligation course through its pages. One is rooted in the creation story and reflects God's concern for this world—all its social patterns and political institutions. To participate in the renewal of human civilization and to seek the amelioration of all its destructive tendencies is pleasing in God's sight. The other stream of obligation is rooted in the redemptive concern that comes to a climax in the salvific work of Christ—his death, resurrection, issuance of the Great Commission, and sending of the Holy Spirit. Both of these mandates are clearly stated as response to the question, What does the Lord require of his people but 'to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with ... God' ([Mic. 6:8](#) and [Mt. 23:23](#)).

At first it seemed that the acceptance of responsibility for both mandates provided evangelicals with a holistic gospel. But in the early 1970s some began to realise that this neat equation did not solve the issue of priority. Which came first, evangelism or social responsibility? Then came Billy Graham's massive 1974 'Lausanne Houseparty' (the International Congress on World Evangelization, consisting of 4,000 guests). It wonderfully affirmed the validity of both mandates in its Covenant (especially paragraph 5), but evangelicals almost immediately thereafter began to divide over the issue of priorities. To some the answer was obvious. Others disagreed. This debate continued throughout the 1970s.

LISTENING TO THE 'THIRD FORCE' (AND MAKING YOUR MISSION THEOLOGY TRINITARIAN)

One of the great signs of hope during the entire postwar period has been the growing vitality and size of the 'Third Force' (Henry P. Van Dusen's phrase). Until the 1970s Pentecostals and the mainline charismatics tended to pursue their own goals for world evangelization. They largely ignored the evangelicals despite the high level of theological agreement and personal commitment they had with them. Unfortunately, certain segments within evangelicalism either openly criticized their exegetical conclusions or despised their social roots. Then these ardent spirits started to invade evangelical seminaries. Fuller's provost, the late Glenn W. Barker, used to say: 'Twenty years ago we were not sure they would make it; now they are running away with all the prizes!' The charismatics began doing what evangelicals P. 61 could only envy. They were not only multiplying churches all over the world but bringing significant renewal to mainline congregations. Here was something separatist dispensationalists thought impossible.

Moreover, these joyful Christians were initiating all sorts of lay evangelistic movements and launching a variety of significant mission societies. Although unashamedly evangelical in their high view of Scripture and their enthusiasm for evangelism and church growth, they tended to draw back from involvement in

interdenominational evangelical enterprises prior to the 1970s. Following Lausanne (1974), however, they came into their own, and caused many non-charismatics to sit up and take notice. Stereotyped impressions and entrenched prejudices began to give way. In no time at all new light was being gained on the previously baffling and divisive question of mission priorities. It came about because of their introduction of the subject of spiritual gifts.

By the mid-1970s Pentecostals and other charismatics had everyone talking about spiritual gifts, their diversity, and their exercise in ministry. A distinct and impressive literature began to appear as the Society for Pentecostal Studies began to function. Eventually Paul Pomerville produced a Ph.D. dissertation on the Pentecostal contribution to evangelical mission theology (1982). He raised the question whether Pentecostal perspectives constituted either a distortion or a correction to mission theology, and then went on to show that if one focuses on the kingdom-of-God motif, not only is the role of the Holy Spirit within a trinitarian view of mission clarified, but the essentiality of the kingdom of God to mission theology is wonderfully established.

The sheer diversity of spiritual gifts listed in various parts of the New Testament ([Rom. 12](#); [1 Cor. 12](#); [Eph. 4](#); [1 Pet. 2](#)) cannot but mean that God does not force his people or their congregations to adopt any one 'authorized' agenda. Spiritual gifts make possible a congregation's Obedience to both the cultural and the redemptive mandates. Since all Christians are the recipients of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence and enablement for confessing Jesus Christ before non-Christians, each congregation must be seen as primarily a confessing presence in society. But in the full exercise of the gifts Christians have individually received, there will always be those involved in the apostolate, serving as God's envoys to the non-Christian world. There will always be others involved in the prophetic calling, reminding churches and Christians of their societal responsibilities. And there will always be those whose concerns are pastoral, assisting local congregations in their worship, nurture, study, and mutual helpfulness ([1 Cor. 12:28-31](#)). What this means is that one cannot establish biblically the thesis [p. 62](#) that evangelism should be the priority of all Christians although all are under obligation to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

A case can be made (in part) for what the Reformers, and many others subsequently believed—that the Great Commission was primarily given to the first apostles. In [Acts 1:2](#) Luke pointedly states that prior to the ascension, Jesus gave this commandment 'through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen'. This means that in their leadership of the emerging church, they were particularly responsible to see that the constant focus of all congregations must be on making disciples of all peoples. And so ever since. Because of the 'sentness' of the church, all Christians must be reminded by their leaders to give a high priority to the sending forth of those gifted for evangelism and outreach to the regions beyond, where Christ has yet to be named ([2 Cor. 10:16](#)). God is concerned that his people be constantly reminded of the need for apostolic advance into neglected areas and among unreached peoples. And significantly, there has yet to emerge a vital mission-oriented congregation whose pastor has been indifferent to the central priority of the Great Commission.

REAFFIRMING THE KINGDOM OF GOD (AND ENTERING THE ECUMENICAL DEBATE)

How can the church be liberated to evangelize this generation? If it confines itself to maintenance activity, to 'churchly' affairs, it becomes preoccupied with religious behaviour and with its own kind of people. It feels itself threatened by the world and retreats from positive interaction with it. But when it becomes kingdom-oriented a

buoyancy of spirit takes over. The priority becomes broad, for kingdom activities include all human concerns and this world as well. As Howard Snyder correctly affirms:

When Christians catch a vision of the Kingdom of God, their sight shifts to the poor, the orphan, the widow, the refugee, the wretched of the earth, to God's future—to the concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world ... If the church has one great need, it is this: To be set free for the Kingdom of God, to be liberated from itself as it has become in order to be itself as God intends. The church must be freed to participate fully in the economy of God [1983:11].

Evangelicals here and there are increasingly coming to sense that the [p. 63](#) kingdom-of-God motif provides what Johannes Verkuyl has called 'the hub around which all of mission work revolves' and adds, 'If it be true that we who practice mission must take the kingdom of God as our constant point of orientation, it is imperative that we pay close heed to the whole range of burdens and evils plaguing mankind' (1978:203). If God's tomorrow means the end of exploitation, injustice, inequality, war, racism, nationalism, suffering, death, and the ignorance of God, Christians must be 'signs' today of God's conquest of all these 'burdens and evils' through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No longer can evangelicals confine themselves to the single priority of proclaiming the knowledge of God among the nations and settle for the status quo of everything else. Of course, Christians shall not establish the kingdom, much less bring it to fullness. Any trinitarian theology of mission worth its salt will show that God alone will accomplish this. The consummation of human history and the manifestation of the kingdom in power and glory will be the work of God alone. But this does not mean that Christians today dare indulge the luxury of indifference to the moral and social issues of today. Only those are 'blessed' who are the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted for righteousness sake: 'Theirs is the kingdom of heaven' ([Mt. 5:7-12](#)).

One theme remains. If evangelicals are to develop an adequate trinitarian mission theology based on the kingdom of God, they must face up to the implications of the ecumenical problem: What must we do with those whose confession of Jesus Christ we must take seriously, yet whose perspectives on the Christian mission differ markedly from our own? Are they to be consigned to outer darkness—excommunicated or ignored—because they 'know' only 'in part' and 'see through a glass darkly' while we possess all truth in perfect balance?

The tragedy is that no Christian's life embodies in fullness the understanding of truth that the person claims to possess. And evangelicals should never forget that the truth they possess is not for them alone but for all the people of God. This means that evangelicals have no alternative but to enter the arena of public debate on the mission of the church in our day. They must expose their insights to the scrutiny of others. They must listen as well as speak. Only thereby will they make any significant contribution to the maturity of the church in our day. To retreat from this obligation is to impoverish themselves as well as others. It goes without saying that such encounter is essential to the renewal of the church. And where in Scripture are Christians told to separate from other Christians simply because they disagree with those others?

One final word. After almost forty years of wilderness wandering, [p. 64](#) evangelicals convened Wheaton 1983: their first international conference on the nature of the church. And they made sure that the keynote address was on the kingdom of God! Were they now ready to enter the Promised Land? Many hope so.

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Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World

Orlando E. Costas

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Parallel to Glasser's tracing of evangelical mission theology, Orlando Costas traces the development of the two-thirds world evangelical theology. He argues that while the western theological development was more or less exclusively shaped by the formal principle of Reformation (the Sola Scriptura), the corrective from the two-thirds world is to use also the material principle of Reformation namely, salvation by grace through faith. Though one may not agree with all of Costas' interpretation, his conclusion, that 'The ultimate test of any theological discourse is not erudite precision but transformative power' cannot be sounder.
Editor

The last decades have witnessed a resurgence of evangelical theology and action. Indeed, one could argue that evangelicals have ceased to be a marginal sector of Protestant Christianity, and have moved into the mainstream of contemporary society. However, we err if we assume that the so-called 'evangelical renaissance' (Bloesch) is just a Euro-American phenomenon, or that it is theologically, culturally and socially homogeneous. As Emilio Castro, General Secretary of the WCC, has stated in a recent essay on 'ecumenism and evangelicalism': 'In the past ... evangelical perspectives on spirituality and [theology] came basically from theologians in the North Atlantic region'; today they are coming from all over the world (p. 9). He also points out that evangelicalism is going through the same process and change which the ecumenical movement has experienced in the last decades, because of the diverse socio-cultural settings of its adherents. Castro's comment is verified by the published reports of several world gatherings during the last decades and by a growing body of publications.

It is my contention that while evangelicals around the world share a Common heritage, their theological articulation is by no means homogeneous. To be sure, evangelicals in the North Atlantic world have had an enormous influence in what I like to call the 'two thirds world'—that planetary space which is the habitat of most of the poor, powerless and oppressed people on earth, which are to be found in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, the Caribbean and continental Latin America. One cannot deny the strong presence and pressures exercised by Euro-American [p. 66](#) evangelicalism on the Two Thirds World through the missionary movement, literature, the electronic media and theological institutions. Notwithstanding this reality, however, there seems to be developing in the Two Thirds World a different kind of evangelical theology which not only addresses questions not usually dealt with by evangelical mainstream theologians in Euro-America, but also employs a different methodology and draws out other conclusions.

To argue my case, I propose, first, to outline briefly, as I understand it, the nature of evangelicalism and its leading theological tenets, especially as it has developed in the United States. I shall then proceed to analyze the emerging evangelical theological discourse in the Two Thirds World, taking as reference representative statements from several theological conferences held within the last five years. I shall conclude With some observations on the mutual challenges of evangelical theology north and south and east and west.

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN THE ONE THIRD WORLD

If there is one single characteristic of evangelical theology, it is its missionary intent. Evangelicalism, as its name suggests, has a burning passion for the communication of the Gospel, especially in those areas where it has not yet been proclaimed. It is not surprising that the Wesleyan Movement, which made such a dramatic impact in the British Isles during the 18th century and in many ways became the basis for Britain's world mission in the 19th century, has been described as 'the evangelical awakening'. Nor is it accidental that Joan Jacobs Brumberg's scholarly study of the life, career and family of Adoniram Judson, the American Baptist pioneer foreign missionary, is used as the key to her analysis of 'evangelical religion' in the U.S. during the 19th century. Wesleyan and Baptist preachers, evangelists and missionaries aptly demonstrate the burning passion of the evangelical movement for world mission and evangelism.

This missiological characteristic is undergirded by four theological distinctives: the authority of Scripture; salvation by grace through faith; conversion as a distinct experience of faith and a landmark of Christian identity; and the demonstration of 'the new life' through piety and moral discipline. The first two are derived from the Protestant Reformation. The other two are tied to the so-called Second Reformation (the Pietist Movement, including the Evangelical Awakening, which sought to complete the First [or theological] Reformation by advocating the reformation of life). The last two principles are also connected with American Revivalism and the Holiness movement. [p. 67](#)

These four theological distinctives have in various ways affected the historical development of the evangelical movement. Thus, European Protestant confessional families, like the Lutherans and the Reformed (including Congregationalists and Presbyterians), define their evangelicalism in terms of the first two distinctives. But for their 'pietist' adherents particularly in Lutheranism (who claim to be *with* their churches but never *under* them), it is especially the latter two that really matter (at least in practice, though not necessarily in theory). Likewise in North America, those churches and Christians who want to stress the orthodox nature of evangelicalism will point to the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation and those who stress its practical and experiential side will focus on Pietism and Revivalism.

Gabriel Fackre has developed a five-fold typology of contemporary North American evangelicalism, using the four distinctives mentioned above as criteria. He classifies evangelicals into the following groups: (1) Fundamentalists, (2) Old Evangelicals, (3) New Evangelicals, (4) Justice and Peace Evangelicals, and (5) Charismatic Evangelicals. In Fackre's view, *Fundamentalists* are characterized both by their view of the authority of Scripture ('plenary verbal inspiration of the original autographs'), their separatist ecclesiology and their doctrinal militancy against all foes. *Old Evangelicals* are those 'who stress the conversion experience and holiness of life and seek to nourish these in the revival tradition and in congregations of fervent piety'. *New Evangelicals* 'insist on the ethical and political relevance of faith as articulated by broad guidelines, stress the intellectual viability of a born-again faith and of orthodox theology, and seek to work out

their point of view within, as well as alongside, traditional denominations'. Fackre identifies as *Justice and Peace Evangelicals* the new generation of Christians who 'express their faith in more radical political and ecclesiastical idiom', who come from an Anabaptist, Wesleyan or high Calvinist stock, and 'call into question the accommodation of today's culture and churches to affluence, militarism, and unjust social and economic structures'. *Charismatic Evangelicals* are identified by their experiential faith, reaching out 'for highly visible signs of the Spirit, primarily the gifts of tongue-speaking (glossolalia) and healing, and intensity of prayer, mercy and communal life' (pp. 5–7).

All of these groups, and their corresponding theological articulations, have made their way, in one form or another, into the Two Thirds World. In terms of *theological production*, the most significant group is the New Evangelicals, and in a lesser way, the Justice and Peace group. The fact that Fackre associates the New Evangelicals with *Christianity Today* (and, one might add, other theologically similar p. 68 periodicals, publishing houses and schools), and links the Justice and Peace Evangelicals with journals like *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*, is an indication of the theological influence of these two groups.

The New Evangelicals, by and large, represent the North American leadership of the Lausanne Movement, the World Evangelical Fellowship (and its North American counterpart, the National Association of Evangelicals), as well as the two large missionary consortia, the Independent Foreign Missions Association (IFMA) and the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA). They also have the most visible presence in theological (and missiological) educational institutions. During the last several decades they have been the largest exporters of North American evangelical theology.

On the other hand, the Justice and Peace Evangelicals represent a new generation of scholars and critics with special interests in and ties to the Two Thirds World. Their criticism of North American religious culture and socio-economic policies, their commitment to a radical discipleship, and their solidarity with the Two Thirds World have made them natural allies of some of the most theologically articulate evangelical voices in that part of the globe. Given the leadership and influence of New Evangelicals in mainstream North American church and society, however, I shall limit my analysis to them.

NEW EVANGELICALS AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

For the New Evangelicals, the heart of evangelicalism is its faithfulness to the Reformation's formal principle of biblical authority, as well as its material or content principle of salvation in Christ through faith. But as Kenneth Kantzer (former editor of *Christianity Today*) has stated in an essay on 'Unity and Diversity in Evangelical Faith':

The formal principle of biblical authority is the watershed between most other movements within the broad stream of contemporary Protestantism and the movement (or movements) of twentieth-century Protestantism known as fundamentalism, which is a term often poorly used for the purpose it is intended to serve, or evangelicalism or conservative Protestantism (p. 39).

Put in other terms, though the New Evangelicals have claimed both principles of the Reformation, their primary principle has been that of biblical authority. This formalistic emphasis does not bypass the need to do theology from the text of Scripture. As Kantzer has also stated: 'The evangelical ... seeks to construct his theology on the teaching of the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible; and the p. 69 formative principle

represents a basic unifying factor throughout the whole of contemporary evangelicalism' (p. 52).

In actual practice, nonetheless, the greater energies of evangelical theological formulations, during the last decade at least, has been focused on the formal question of the authority and inspiration of Scripture rather than on its teachings. It is no surprise that the most widely published representative of this brand of evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry (another former editor of *Christianity Today*), entitled his six-volume *magnum opus*, *God, Revelation and Authority*. Nor is it any surprise that Kantzer, in the same essay previously quoted, likens the debate over the authority and inspiration of Scripture to the debates over the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ's person in earlier periods of Christian history.

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN THE TWO THIRDS WORLD

Recognizing that many contemporary evangelical theologians in the Two Thirds World have been formed and informed (and sometimes even deformed!) by New Evangelical theologians, they do not appear to be as concerned over the formal authority question as they are over the material principle. To be sure, one can find evangelical theological formulations in the Two Thirds World that reveal a similar concern over the authority of Scripture. However, such formulations are neither the most authentic expression of evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World, nor the most numerous. To validate this assertion, I will turn to the concluding statements from three major theological conferences on Evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World held in Thailand (March 1982), Korea (August 1982) and Mexico (June 1984).

The Thailand and Mexico meetings had a missiological thrust and a theological content. They were sponsored by a loose fellowship of Evangelical mission theologians from the Two Thirds World. The Thailand conference revolved around 'The Proclamation of Christ in the Two Thirds World'. It produced a final document ('Towards a Missiological Christology in the Two Thirds World') and a book (*Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World*), published first in India and most recently in the United States. The Mexico meeting focused on the Holy Spirit and evangelical spirituality. It also produced a final statement ('Life in the Holy Spirit') which will be part of the book soon to be published with the conference papers. The Korean Third World Theologians Consultation was sponsored by the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa and Madagascar, the Asia Theological Association, the Latin American Theological Fraternity p.70 and the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship. Working with the theme, 'Theology and Bible in Context', it produced the Seoul Declaration ('Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World').

All three documents express a clear commitment to Scripture as the source and norm of theology. They express an unambiguous commitment to its authority, not only in terms of the content of the faith and the nature of its practice, but also in the approach to its interpretation. The Scriptures are normative in the understanding of the faith, the lifestyle of God's people, and the way Christians go about their theological reflection. Yet the Scriptures are not to be heard and obeyed unhistorically. Indeed, the normative and formative roles of Scripture are mediated by our respective contexts. These contexts are, generally speaking, characterized in these documents as a reality of poverty, powerlessness and oppression on the one hand, and on the other, as religiously and ideologically pluralistic spaces. Thus a contextual hermeneutic appears as a *sine qua non* of evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World.

Thailand, for example, reported that the participants ‘worked with a common commitment to Scripture as the norm ... but ... were also ... deeply aware that the agenda for ... theological activity ... must be given ... by [the] respective contexts’ (Samuel and Sugden, p. 409). Nevertheless, such a contextual reading of the Scripture should be equally informed by ‘the biblical passion for justice, the biblical concern for the ‘wholeness’ of salvation, and the biblical concept of the universality of Christ’ (*Ibid.*). In other words, the Bible has its own contexts and passionate concerns which must be taken seriously into account in the movement from our socio-religious situation to the Scriptures. The text is equally active in the setting of the theological agenda. One does not simply come to it with any issue that arises out of reality but especially with those that coincide with the concerns of biblical faith. One must also bear in mind those issues that arise out of the text itself and pose questions to one’s socio-historical situation.

Thailand’s central concern was Christology and its relevance for the proclamation of the gospel in the Two Thirds World. It underscores ‘the historical reality of Jesus ... in his concrete socio-economic, political, racial and religious context’. It also acknowledges that he is ‘the Incarnate Word of God’ and affirms his ‘universal lordship’. Thus while expressing ‘solidarity with the poor, the powerless and the oppressed ...’, with those who are followers of other religions and with all people everywhere’, it also recognizes the universality of sin p. 71 and the universal significance of Christ’s saving work for all people. ‘We are all under the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we are committed to proclaim to all, especially our brothers and sisters in the Two Thirds World’ (*Ibid.*, p. 412.). Thailand’s Christological concern was, therefore, informed by the historic evangelical passion for the communication of the gospel.

Mexico followed the pattern and perspective of Thailand. It assumed what Thailand had said about Scripture, context and hermeneutics, affirming the Bible as the fundamental source of knowledge concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Beyond this formal statement, the final report was limited to a summary of how the Conference understood what the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit. It demonstrates an overwhelming interest in the *content* of the Scriptures rather than on its formal authority.

The purpose of the Mexico Conference was ‘to understand how the person and work of the Holy Spirit relates to the context of other religious traditions and movements for social transformation...’ With regard to other religious traditions, the final document states:

No religion is totally devoid of the Spirit’s witness. But no religion is totally receptive to the Spirit’s promptings.... The Gospel ... provides a measure to evaluate all religious traditions, that measure being Christ himself (and not any form of Christianity). The encounter of Christian revelation with other religions is therefore not that of mutually exclusive systems. Persons of other faiths have been known to discover in Christ the answer to questions raised within their own traditions. We believe that such experiences indicate the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit with other religions ([Acts 14:14-18; 17:22-31; Rom. 1:18-25; 2:7-16](#)).

Thus, when we bear witness to Christ in dialogue with persons of other faiths, we can accept their integrity whilst we also affirm the ultimacy of Christ.

This posture reflects a positive attitude toward people of other religions. At the same time, it retains a distinctive Christian character and the evangelistic edge so characteristic of evangelical theology.

The Mexico Report points to the category of ‘justice’ as the criterion for evaluating the Spirit’s work in movements for social transformation. It states that the Spirit is discerned to be at work in such movements when the transformation they help bring about ‘results in justice with and on behalf of the poor’. The document goes on to assert that

To be faithful bearers of the Spirit who ‘comes alongside’, we are called to ‘come alongside’ such movements not with unqualified acceptance of their agenda, but with the agenda of the Spirit. p. 72

This agenda is described in terms of ‘democratisation, the socialization of power and the just distribution of wealth’. The Spirit calls us as followers of Christ, ‘to serve as witnesses against the self-interests among those involved in ... struggles for power, and as channels of communication for rival factions having common goals’. However, our witness must also ‘retain its distinctive Christian character and its evangelistic edge’ (*Ibid.*, p. 4).

The Korea Consultation, with a much larger participation and external (Euro-American) influence, does reflect a concern for the formal aspects of biblical authority. It states emphatically:

We unequivocally uphold the primacy and authority of the Scriptures ... We have concertedly committed ourselves to building our theology on the inspired and infallible Word of God, under the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. No other sources stand alongside. Despite our varying approaches to doing theology, we wholeheartedly and unanimously subscribe to the primacy of the Scriptures ... (p. 3).

Yet the Seoul Declaration also states that the commitment to the authority of Scripture ‘takes seriously the historical and the cultural contexts of the biblical writings’. Moreover, it asserts: ‘For us, to know is to do, to love is to obey. Evangelical theology must root itself in a life of obedience to the Word of God and submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ’ (*Ibid.*). Finally, the Declaration argues that

A biblical foundation for theology presupposes the church as a hermeneutical community, the witness of the Holy Spirit as the key to the comprehension of the Word of God, and contextualization as the New Testament pattern for transposing the Gospel into different historical situations. We affirm that theology as a purely academic discipline is something we must neither pursue nor import. To be biblical, Evangelical theology must depend on sound exegesis, seek to edify the body of Christ, and motivate it for mission. Biblical theology has to be actualized in the servanthood of a worshipping and witnessing community called to make the Word of God live in our contemporary situations. (p. 3).

Even in those passages where the Seoul Declaration uses formal authority language, it checks it against a contextual and communal hermeneutic, and a Christological and pneumatological underpinning: the Scriptures are under the authority of Christ and depend on the Holy Spirit for the communication of its message. Furthermore, the Declaration balances its authority language with its emphasis on Christian obedience, faithfulness to the biblical message and the imperative of mission in the life of the church. p. 73

This ‘material’ check and balance helps us understand the two-fold theological critique of the Declaration—against Western (by which is meant mainstream Euro-American) and Third World theologies, respectively. Western theology, ‘whether liberal or evangelical, conservative or progressive’, is criticized for being, by and large, obsessed with problems of ‘faith and reason’.

All too often, it has reduced the Christian faith to abstract concepts which may have answered the questions of the past, but which fail to grapple with the issues of today. It has consciously or unconsciously been conformed to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. Sometimes it has been utilized as a means to justify colonialism, exploitation, and oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations. Furthermore, having been wrought within Christendom, it hardly addresses

the questions of people living in situations characterized by religious pluralism, secularism, resurgent Islam or Marxist totalitarianism. (p. 2).

This statement may lack precision. However, it does articulate a well-known criticism of Western theologies from both the Two Thirds World and minority voices in Europe and North America. Moreover, it has the merit of including the Evangelical critique of Euro-American mainstream theologies. This makes all the more meaningful the call for liberation 'from [the] captivity to individualism and rationalism of Western theology in order to allow the Word of God to work with full power'. (p. 2).

The Seoul Declaration also criticizes some of the emerging theologies of the Two Thirds World, though it does recognize similarities in their respective socio-historical struggles. Both have suffered under colonialism and oppression, are currently struggling against injustice and poverty in situations of religious pluralism, and acknowledge the need 'to articulate the Gospel in words and deeds' in their respective contexts (p. 3). Yet, the Seoul Declaration is equally uneasy with some of the basic premises of these theologies. It is particularly critical of some liberation theologies. While heartily admitting that liberation theologies have raised vital questions which cannot be ignored by Evangelicals, the Declaration nevertheless rejects the tendency 'to give primacy to a praxis which is not biblically informed ...' Likewise, it objects 'to the use of a socio-economic analysis as the hermeneutical key to the Scriptures'. And finally, it rejects 'any ideology which under the guise of science and technology is used as an historical mediation of the Christian faith' (*Ibid.*).

The positive yet critical posture reflected in the final documents of these three meetings demonstrates the authenticity of the Evangelical theological reflection which is currently taking place in the Two Thirds [p. 74](#) World. Evangelical theologians in these parts of the world are appropriating the best of their spiritual tradition and are putting it to use in a constructive critical dialogue with their interlocutors in and outside of their historical space. For them the Evangelical tradition is not locked into the socio-cultural experience of the West. They insist that they have the right to articulate theologically the evangelical tradition in their own terms and in light of their own issues.

Evangelicals North and South, East and West

So far, I have argued that though Evangelical theology emerges out of European and North American Protestant Christianity and has been carried to the Two Thirds World by the missionary movement, theological institutions and publications, there is an identifiable difference between its most influential and visible contemporary expression (New Evangelical theology) and the emerging Evangelical theological discourse in the Two Thirds World. This difference lies in the latter's concern with the formal principle of Protestant theology. The emphasis on the content of the gospel and the teaching of the biblical text rather than on formal questions of authority and the philosophical presuppositions behind a particular doctrine of inspiration, is freeing Evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World to employ a contextual hermeneutics patterned after the transpositional method witnessed throughout the New Testament. This also explains why Evangelicals in the Two Thirds World are more willing to deal with questions of religious pluralism and social, economic and political oppression than most Evangelical theologians in the One Third World.

Without putting all mainstream Evangelicals in the One Third World in the same bag, it seems quite clear to me that mainstream Evangelical theologians are too obsessed with the Enlightenment and not enough with the explosive social, economic, political, cultural and religious reality of most people in the world. As Bernard Ramm has stated quite

candidly in the opening pages of his book, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*:

The Enlightenment sent shock waves through Christian theology as nothing did before or after. Theology has never been the same since the Enlightenment. And therefore each and every theology, evangelical included, must assess its relationship to the Enlightenment. (p. 4).

It should be pointed out that this obsession with the Enlightenment as an intellectual challenge to the faith pertains basically to its p. 75 seventeenth and eighteenth century phase which revolved around the issue of freedom from authority through reason. This obsession is shared by practically all Euro-American theologies. Indeed it can be argued that all mainstream theologies in Western Europe and North America, 'from Immanuel Kant to Carl F. H. Henry', have been, by and large, discourses on the reasonableness of faith. Their primary concern has been the sceptic, atheist, materialist-heathen—the nonreligious person. This is why the second phase of the Enlightenment, associated with the nineteenth century movement of freedom from political, cultural, economic and social oppression, has been on the main a peripheral issue in Euro-American theology, including Evangelical theology. Yet, this is one issue of fundamental importance in the theological agenda of the Two Thirds World. For all its missionary passion and experience, mainstream Evangelical theology in North America has yet to learn from its missionary heritage how to ask more central questions to the destiny of humankind, the future of the world, even the central concerns of the Scriptures.

In airing this criticism I do not mean to belittle the fact that there are always two sides to the problem of unbelief: (1) the absence of faith, and (2) the denial (practical or theoretical) of faith. Theology in North American and Western Europe has been generally concerned with the absence of faith and its theoretical denial. But it must be acknowledged that from the Evangelical Awakening to the present, there have been mainstream Euro-American theologies and theological movements that have sought to address the problem of the practical denial of faith in the unjust treatment of the weak and downtrodden. This is the case with the theology of the Wesley brothers, the Oberlin theology of George Finney, the theology of the Social Gospel, the practical theology of the early Reinhold Niebuhr, the political theology of Jurgen Moltmann and J. B. Metz, and the prophetic theologies of mainstream ecumenical theologians, like Robert McAfee Brown and the Peace and Justice Evangelicals. These theologies have attempted, in varying degrees and in their own peculiar ways, to deal with the problem of social oppression and alienation. In so doing they have built a modest bridge toward a fundamental concern of any theology in the Two Thirds World, namely, the cry of the oppressed and its disclosure of the practical 'unbelief' of professing Christians who oppress their neighbours.

My critique is, furthermore, not intended to obliterate the modest dialogue which has been taking place during the last several years around the question of poverty, powerlessness, oppression, and religious pluralism between some mainstream Evangelical theologians p. 76 and their counterparts in the Two Thirds World. Indeed, during the Thailand meeting there were two theologians representing European and North American Evangelical thought. And while they came to the meeting with questions pertaining to traditional theological issues of the North Atlantic,¹ they had to cope with other theological agendas (and did so positively and constructively). They realized that

¹ Ronald Sider (U.S.A.) presented a paper on 'Miracles, Methodology and Modern-Western Christology' and David Cook on 'Significant Trends in Western Christological Debate', Cf. Samuel and Sugden, pp. 351 ff., 371 ff.

their particular agenda was pertinent to a rather small sector of humankind. They also acknowledged that their agenda was even different from that of the two 'minority' participants from North America for whom North American Evangelical theology had dealt especially with the truth of God's justice.² As one of them commented:

The issue that divides me from mainstream white evangelicals is not whether I believe the Bible to be the Word of God which I do, but ... that I want to ... read [it] from my situation ... of oppression....

I stand in a dialectical tension with the system which has kept my people in oppression ... I coincide ... with mainstream white evangelicals ... about belief in Jesus Christ. We ... are committed to Jesus Christ [as] ... Lord and ... Saviour. We ... are judged by the same Word. But when we [ask] what does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ, and ... 'who is this Jesus that we confess as ... Lord and ... Saviour and what does [he] command us to do?' at that precise point we start departing from one another.³

In March 1983, a consultation was held in Tlayacapan, Mexico, between several types of Evangelical theologians from North America, and their counterparts in Latin America and the minority communities of the U.S. This consultation focused on 'Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas' and established a methodology that permitted Evangelical scholars to wrestle with concrete biblical texts and debate such questions as whether our interlocutor is really the 'atheist' (as Evangelical theologians who wrestle with the questions of the first phase of the Enlightenment argue) or the alienated (*i.e.*, the non-person who may be religious but has been exploited, marginated and dehumanized by religious institutions, as many theologians in the Two Thirds World and North American minority communities would argue). The latter issue was not resolved, but the hermeneutical exercises were very fruitful. Afterwards, Grant Osborne, from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote in *TSF Bulletin*: p. 77

Everyone present felt that the conference ... was extremely beneficial. Ways of extending the dialogue were suggested.... All in all, it was felt that North Americans need to enter a Latin American setting and do theological reflection in the context of poverty. Those from the North, before passing judgment, should be willing to enter a Nicaragua or an El Salvador and experience those realities from the inside. (p. 22).

(One might add that this could apply just as well to the urbanghettoes of North America.)

Lest I be misunderstood, let me conclude by saying that it has not been my intention to idealize Evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World nor endorse the tendency to generalize, avoid precision and even belittle the significance of Western theological debates. It is readily admitted that Evangelical theology in the Two Thirds World is represented by many voices with divergent views. Indeed, it has a long way to go, and in the process it will have a lot to learn from its counterpart in the One Third World.

However, I submit that the ultimate test of any theological discourse is not erudite precision but transformative power. It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that it is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God's mission in the world. As the Apostle Paul

² Cf. George Cummings, 'Who Do You Say That I Am? A North American Minority Answer to the Christological Question', in Samuel and Sugden, pp. 319-337.

³ Comment by a minority North American participant in the discussion with George Cummings.

reminded the Corinthian church many years ago, ‘the kingdom of God is not talk but power’ ([1 Cor. 4:20](#)).

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Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism - II

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This is the second of the two parts of the thirty-eight page document produced by the task force of the Theological Commission which was entrusted with the study of Roman Catholicism. As mentioned in the last issue, this statement was adopted by the World Evangelical Fellowship General Assembly in its last meeting at Singapore, June 1986.

Editor

VI. MODERNISM/THEOLOGICAL LIBERALISM

Both of these concepts, ‘liberalism’ as well as ‘modernism’, are difficult to define clearly. This holds true of contemporary Roman Catholicism no less than of contemporary Protestantism. Yet together these two concepts do reflect to a large degree the crisis of twentieth century Christendom—within Roman Catholic as well as Protestant churches. The term ‘modernism’ indicates that we are dealing with issues born of the post-Enlightenment ‘modern mind’. By ‘liberalism’ we mean that widespread movement during the past two centuries which is known more precisely as ‘theological liberalism’. It calls into question fundamental articles of the historic Christian faith.

From the decrees of its latest councils (1869–70 and 1962–65) and its many papal encyclicals over the past century, the Roman Catholic Church has clearly identified what it understands by the threat of modernist/liberalist heresies within its circles—which parallel closely positions held by some outside of Roman Catholic circles and which we as Evangelicals would also regard as heretical. These include attacks upon such biblically-based doctrines as the inspiration, authority, and infallibility of Scripture; the deity of Christ; the virgin birth; the reality of miracles; the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ; the doctrines of creation, original sin, and the last things; together with major aspects of Christian ethics. Modernism/liberalism also launched assaults upon typically Roman Catholic traditions, such as papal infallibility, the immaculate conception and heavenly assumption of the virgin Mary, celibate clergy, the exclusion of women from priestly ordination, and the denunciation of artificial birth control methods. Our concern at this point is with the former catalogue of errors.

Such modernist/liberalist intrusions into the thought and life of the church are traceable to the radical and sweeping impact of the eighteenth century Enlightenment. By the middle of the nineteenth century this movement had created a major crisis within the Roman Catholic Church. The hierarchy viewed the church as a fortress under [p. 79](#) siege.

One after another, bishops of Rome such as Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius X, and Pius XII took vigorous steps to stem the modernist/liberalist tide and to maintain and restore both biblical and traditional orthodoxy. This is evident from the papal declaration of the immaculate conception in 1854, the publication of the syllabus of errors in 1864, the pronouncement on papal infallibility by Vatican I in 1870, the elevation of Thomas Aquinas to patron saint of educators and angelic doctor of the church in 1879, the series of papal encyclicals late in the nineteenth century condemning liberal ideologies and modern culture, the denunciation of theological modernism in 1907, the imposition of the anti-modernist oath upon all priests in 1910, the repeated affirmations of Thomism as the trusted source of Roman Catholic teaching during the early decades of this century, climaxed finally in the encyclical, *Humani Generis*, and the papal declaration on the heavenly assumption in 1950.¹³

Meanwhile, during the years preceding and following World War II the 'New Theology' emerged upon the scene. The papacy responded by issuing stern though generally vague warnings against 'certain false opinions' being promulgated by this school of thought: its reliance upon existentialist philosophy, its acceptance of the historical-critical method in biblical studies, and its tendency to re-evaluate critically the development of dogma within church tradition. Rome apparently sensed in the rise of this 'New Theology' a disguised return to the 'old modernism'. This was vigorously denied by its advocates and defenders. To others, however, as time went by, the connections seemed too obvious to be overlooked: the 'New Theology' is in effect an updated revision on the 'old modernism'. Add to that the momentum of the 'aggiornamento' spirit unleashed by John XXIII, the 'renewals' enacted by Vatican II, and the confusing developments of the past two decades—it is then understandable that many Roman Catholics are left in a state of 'spiritual dizziness'. The doors and windows of the Church of Rome now stand wide open to radically new ideas. Its largely monolithic confessional and theological structure (*semper eadem*) is crumbling. The philosophies of Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger are making their deep inroads. Post-Barthian and post-Bultmannian theologies, together with the monist ideas of process theologians, are prevalent in Roman Catholic as well as in mainline Protestant circles. The basic thrust in the writings of Roman Catholic thinkers such as Rahner, Teilhard de Chardin, Küng, Schillebeeckx, and Schoonenberg do not differ substantially from those of their liberal and p. 80 secular Protestant counterparts. The granting of a *Nihil Obstat* and an *Imprimatur* seems until recently to have been little more than a routine ritual. Along the way Roman conservatives may have won some battles against modernism/liberalism. But now, despite continuing papal resistance, is Rome losing the war? Will the 'new freedom'—the Enlightenment revisited—win the day?

Clearly Rome is not immune to modernist/liberalist infiltrations. What accounts for this growing openness to alien ideas? We cannot overlook Roman Catholicism's longstanding commitment to a dualist nature/grace world view. With it comes a strong internal tension between authority and freedom, based on the dogma of two orders of reality and correspondingly two orders of knowledge. In the higher realm of faith, grace, and supernatural things, the teaching office of the church exercises its dogmatic authority firmly in disciplining departures from revealed truth. But in the lower realm of nature, where the natural and social sciences, scientific data, and philosophical studies prevail, Rome's magisterial policy allows ample room for free rational inquiry.

This dichotomy raises a number of critical questions. Where does the line of demarcation lie between these two areas of jurisdiction? Who draws the line? How can the limits of academic freedom be circumscribed? Theoretically this dichotomy defies

¹³ Cf. W. Challis, 'Biblical Studies and Roman Catholicism', *Churchman*, Vol. 94, No. 14, 1980, p. 323.

clear definition. In practice too this ‘upstairs/downstairs’ distinction between grace and nature is untenable, for eventually nature ‘eats up’ grace (Francis Schaeffer). Within the cultural dynamics of our age, reason overwhelms faith. Rationality reshapes traditional Roman Catholic fidelity to the body of basic Christian beliefs. Adherence to the modern mind presses the articles of Christian faith into its own mould. The magisterial authority of the Roman church then finds it increasingly difficult to hold the line against the aggressive claims made on behalf of academic freedom—especially in the face of the secular spirit of our times. Current debates concerning liberation theologies amply illustrate this dilemma. Thus natural theology renders a theology of grace increasingly irrelevant.

While criticizing these heresies within Roman Catholicism, we as evangelical Christians, facing the complexities of our modern world, and conscious of similar shortcomings in our own tradition, reaffirm our commitment to a biblically unified world view and to the fundamental articles of the historic Christian faith.

VII. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE

Paul’s letter to Roman Christians has played a central role in nearly **P. 81** every reformation in the life of the church. This is understandable, given man’s persistent inclination toward self-help patterns of religion. Romans stands as a frontal challenge to all such forms of self-righteousness. Its central teaching is justification by faith alone. This is the heart of the gospel. Luther therefore calls Romans ‘the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest expression: ... in essence it is a brilliant light, almost enough to illumine the whole Bible’ (Preface to *Romans*).

For the Reformers justification by faith was more than merely one doctrine among others. It is the very foundation of the assurance of salvation and the life of sanctification. Calvin calls it ‘the main hinge on which religion turns’ (*Institutes*, III, 11, 1). From Reformation times to the present the doctrine of justification by faith alone has repeatedly emerged as the crucial point of confrontation between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. Even in our ecumenical age it has lost little of its deeply religious urgency. Perhaps a hasty survey will help to keep the issue clearly in focus.

Tirelessly Martin Luther proclaimed the biblical message that ‘the just shall live by faith alone’. Consistent with his views on law and gospel, Luther’s stance is clear: ‘The promises of God give what the commandments of God demand, and fulfil what the law prescribes, so that all things may be God’s alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfills’. Therefore ‘no good work can rely upon the Word of God or live in the soul, for faith alone and the Word of God rule in the soul’. It is clear then, Luther adds, ‘that a Christian has all he needs in faith and needs no works to justify him’ (*The Freedom of the Christian*): he receives a righteousness which is not his own, but a *justitia aliena* (an ‘alien righteousness’), a free gift of God’s grace.

Similarly, second generation Reformer, John Calvin, holds that he is justified who, ‘excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner, but as a righteous man’. Our justification by faith therefore means ‘nothing else than to acquit of guilt him who was accused, as if his innocence were confirmed ... Since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not only by the confirmation of our innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ’ (*Institutes*, III, 11, 2–3). Thus Calvin reaffirms Luther’s teaching on the ‘great

challenge’—Christ became what he was not, unrighteous, to make us what we by nature are not, righteous. All this is *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. p. 82

It was in vigorous response to this newly rearticulated proclamation of the gospel that the Council of Trent formulated its dogmas. Its decrees still stand as the official confessional voice of the Counter Reformation. Modern Catholicism is compelled to take the irrevocable teachings of Trent on justification by faith as its starting point in the renewed contemporary dialogues. Recognizing that often affirmations are best clarified by their accompanying rejections, current encounters between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals must come to terms with (at least) the following four ‘canons concerning justification’.

9. If anyone shall say that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will—let him be anathema (Denzinger, 1559).

11. If anyone shall say that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and charity that is poured fourth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God—let him be anathema (Denzinger, 1561).

12. If anyone shall say that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence [*fiducia*] in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone which justifies us—let him be anathema (Denzinger, 1562).

24. If anyone shall say that the justice [righteousness] received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not the cause of its increase—let him be anathema (Denzinger, 1574).

In recent times, however, the Reformer’s ringing affirmation of justification by faith alone has gained a more appreciative hearing even in Roman Catholic circles. We are witnessing a new openness to this central biblical teaching.

Around the middle of this century, for example, the longstanding Trentine dogmas became the focal point of renewed theological reflection. Hans Küng forced the issue with his book, *Justification* (1957). Launching a ‘self-appraisal’ of his Roman Catholic tradition and reassessing it ‘in the mirror of Karl Barth’s theology’, Küng argues that we are labouring under a 500 year old misunderstanding. Rightly understood, he contends, the views of Trent and of the Reformers on justification by faith are in essential agreement.

Küng’s book includes an introductory letter of response by Karl Barth, who offers the following amazing and amusing rejoinder: p. 83

You can imagine my considerable amazement at this bit of news; and I suppose that many Roman Catholic readers will at first be no less amazed ... Of course, the problem is whether what you have presented here really represents the teaching of your church ... If the things you cite from Scripture, from older and more recent Roman Catholic theology, from Denzinger and hence from the Tridentine text, do actually represent the teaching of your church and are establishable as such, ... then, having twice gone to the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Trent to commune with the genius loci, I may very well have to hasten there a third time to make contrite confession—‘Fathers, I have sinned’. But taking the statements of the Sixth Session as we now have them before us—statements correctly or incorrectly formulated for reasons then considered compelling—don’t you agree that I should be permitted to plead mitigating circumstances for the considerable difficulty I had trying to discover in that text what you have found to be true Catholic teaching?

Though Barth's views on justification by faith differ significantly from those of the Reformers, as well as from our own, we agree with his critical conclusion, contradicting Küng, that the views of Trent stand radically opposed to those of the Reformers.

These recent and surprising developments have not yet run their full course, as is evident from current Roman Catholic/Lutheran discussions. These meetings have resulted in the publication of an inter-confessional statement on justification by faith, including the following lines:

Our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel, whereby the good news of God's merciful action in Christ is made known; we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God's promise and saving work in Christ (*Origins*, October, 1983, p. 279).

While we are inclined to subscribe to such a heart-warming statement, we confess our uneasiness with the restriction which the word 'ultimate' seems to imply. We also observe that the nature of justification, whether we are *declared* righteous or *made* righteous by infused grace, is left unclarified.

From these recent developments it appears that many are struggling these days to formulate a Roman Catholic version of the *sola gratia/sola fide* gospel, so central to the Reformation. Can Rome shed itself of its legacy of human cooperation in the act of justification? The ongoing process of updating and restating old dogmas raises the further questions: Are we witnessing the birth-pangs of a new Roman Catholic confession on justification by faith? Is this possible, given the Roman Catholic view on infallible truth and the unchangeability of dogma? Were the doctrinal intentions of the Tridentine fathers really different from the plain sense of their words? Are the anathemas past? [p. 84](#)

Meanwhile Trent stands firm as Rome's first-line confessional pronouncement on the reformational view of justification. This includes both its dogmatic declarations and its anathemas. Vatican I did nothing to change that. Nor was justification a major point on Vatican II's agenda. The documents of Vatican II contain only oblique references to it. They break no new ground. Apart from a new Roman Catholic confession on justification by faith, Trent remains a major barrier between heirs of the Reformation and Roman Catholicism.

VIII. SACRAMENTALISM AND THE EUCHARIST

For the Church of Rome, 'catholicism' and 'sacramentalism' go hand in hand. Both in its theology and in its practice it gives great weight to the seven rites which it calls sacraments. Already in the sixteenth century the Reformers made a decisive break with this sacramental tradition. They took issue not only with the number of ceremonies which may rightly be regarded as sacraments, but also with the importance, status, and function which the Roman Catholic Church attaches to them. They did so out of loyalty to the gospel and in obedience to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. Luther led the way in this as he proclaimed the message of *sola fide* (by faith alone), calling for *fiducia* (trust in the gospel promises), and in this light denouncing the Babylonian captivity of the Roman Church. With even greater cogency, Zwingli and Calvin followed suit. Various Anabaptist reformers went even further, offering an alternative sacramental theology. Ever since the sixteenth century evangelical Christians have shown a distinctively reformational distrust and distaste for Roman Catholic sacramentalism.

The Roman Catholic Church views the sacraments as efficacious signs. That is, they accomplish what they signify: *significando causant*—in signifying grace, they cause it to happen. This belief implies a conjunction of two diverse elements—a convergence of the

two concepts of 'sign' and 'cause'. Throughout the centuries Roman Catholic theology has been striving to express clearly a proper balance or synthesis of these two elements.

On the one hand, the idea of 'signification' calls for *subjective* involvement on the part of the recipients of the sacraments. For a 'sign' is meant to be read and acted upon by those who receive it. As 'sacraments of faith' these rites call for belief, or at least the absence of any obstacle (*obex*) to grace in the heart of the recipients. This is a condition for fruitful participation in the sacraments and for receiving the grace which they convey. As 'signs' the sacraments are also to be p. 85 distinguished from the reality to which they refer. Thus according to Roman teaching, the Mass remains a non-bloody sacrifice, pointing to Golgotha, without detracting from the once-for-all sacrifice of the cross.

On the other hand, the idea of instrumental 'causality' brings with it a full emphasis upon the *objective* efficacy of the sacraments. Sacraments work *ex opere operato*—a canonized phrase in Roman Catholic sacramentology. It means that the sacraments are efficacious in themselves—'they work by their own working'. The effects of sacraments are not dependent upon the attitude or merits of either the priest or the recipient—contrary to the rule that holds for all other activities. This is so because the sacramental act is in essence an act of Christ himself, operating through his servant, the priest (called 'another Christ').¹⁴ In the words of Pope Paul VI:

Let no one deny that the sacraments are acts of Christ, who administers them through the agency of men. Therefore, they are holy of themselves, and owing to the virtue of Christ they confer grace to the soul as they touch the body.¹⁵

Lending added strength to their causal status, sacraments are said to produce a specific effect (not grace) whenever they are validly administered, even if they are not received in faith and goodwill. This is true of the 'character' which is conferred by baptism and holy orders, as well as in the conversion of the elements in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is viewed as the 'total Christ'—that is, Christ and the church. As such it is a propitiatory sacrifice for the living and the dead.¹⁶

Clearly, Roman Catholic theology is hard pressed to hold these two sides of the sacrament together—'signification' and 'causality'.¹⁷ This is evident in the repeated resurgence of a Scotist emphasis upon the objective causality of sacraments, despite the more balanced Thomist position which the Council of Trent appears to endorse. It is also evident in the very subtle and complicated theory of transubstantiation.

No part of traditional Roman Catholic sacramentology has been repealed by the Vatican. In recent years both Paul VI and John Paul II p. 86 have re-emphasized certain aspects of it. Only a few outspoken modernists within Roman Catholic circles have dissented from what they regard as 'obsolete' forms, while still claiming to be faithful to their deepest intent. Yet spectacular changes have taken place. This is true in liturgical practices: one can attend masses which outwardly differ very little from evangelical services. It is also true currently among many who profess allegiance to official Roman Catholic sacramental theology. During the post-Tridentine 'modern' era heavy emphasis

¹⁴ The priest *alter est Christus*, according to the Encyclical *Ad catholic sacerdotii* (1935) (Denzinger, 2275); another phrase, more widely used, is *in persona Christi*, cf. Maurice Vidal, 'Ministre des sacrements et foi en Jésus-Christ', in the important symposium, Joseph Doré, ed., *Sacrements de Jesus-Christ* (Paris: Desclée, 1983), pp. 260ff.

¹⁵ *Mysterium fidei*, 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4: 'the Lord immolates himself in a non-bloody manner'.

¹⁷ As noted by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, IIIa, Q. 62, art. 1, ad 1.

was placed on the *objective* side of the sacraments, reflecting the juridical mind of Rome, intending thus to bolster its institutional prerogatives. With the emergence of the liturgical renewal movement earlier in this century, however, which got underway with Plus X's blessing, a new emphasis fell upon the community's participation in the sacraments. It stressed the organic union of sacramental commemoration with the total life and worship of the church. It represented a rediscovery of the riches and more flexible understanding of sacraments in the Patristic tradition. The key idea became 'mystery', evident especially in the 'mysterical' sacramentology of Dom Odo Casel. The celebration of the Eucharist was viewed as making the past event of salvation history present to the faithful today, after the fashion of rites in mythical religions.

Since the middle of this century a similar 'representational' view of the sacraments came to the fore, closely associated with the idea of a 'memorial' feast, which allegedly reflects an Hebraic outlook. The language of salvation-history become predominant—for example, the paschal theme. Personalistic categories became popular, together with an insistence on faith as the *subjective* correlative of the sacraments—the faith of the church, for example, in the case of infant baptism. Christ or the church itself was hailed as the primordial sacrament. During the sixties the idea of 'symbol' became more and more popular, but with a modification of its older, more inflexible connotations. Appealing to the concept 'symbol', theologians sought to erase the hard and fast distinctions between sign and reality, between spiritual and corporeal, between bisubjective and *objective*. Latest developments include the political radicalization of the spiritual moment of the Eucharist. The sharing of bread and wine in remembrance of a revolutionary Jesus is experienced as a motivating symbol among liberationists in their militantly prophetic struggle against social inequities and class oppression. Moreover, some uneasiness has emerged over infant baptism, mostly among members of the charismatic movement. Others draw upon the social sciences to interpret sacramental 'symbol' as an expression of ritual anthropology. p. 87 One leading sacramentologist defines the sacraments, furthermore, as 'the symbolic language acts of the church', as 'performance language acts' by which the community receives its identity, structure, and ethos.¹⁸

Despite these many dramatic departures from the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of the sacraments, the official dogma remains unchallenged, that sacraments are more than 'mere' signs. They are effectual operations as means of access to God.

We as Evangelicals may welcome the direction that some of these changes seem to be taking. This situation within Roman Catholicism is, however, fraught with many ambiguities. Revision is so limited on crucial points and so devoid of official sanction in its bolder strokes, that, at present, no definitive response to these changes is possible. It would be possible at this point, and perhaps even relevant and helpful, to engage in a theoretical critique of traditional Roman Catholic sacramentalism, especially on the causal efficacy which it attributes to these rites. We shall, however, concentrate instead on the following more biblical objections.

The causal aspect of Roman Catholic teaching on the sacraments stands in sharp disagreement with the Scriptures. This contradiction is most blatantly evident when one compares the traditional dogma of the eucharistic sacrifice with the clear statements of the Epistle to the Hebrews concerning the finality of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. On the function of sacraments Roman Catholic theology can appeal only to a misguided exegesis

¹⁸ Louis-Marie Chauvet, 'Le sacramentologue aux prises avec l'Eucharistie,' *La Maison-Dieu*, 137 (1979), p. 69; *Du symbolique au symbole: Essai sur les sacrements* (Paris: Cerf, 1979), reviewed by Claude Geffré, *La Maison-Dieu* 142 (1980), pp. 49–55; his chapter, 'Sacramentaire et christologie: La liturgie, lieu de la christologie', in J. Doré, ed., *Sacrements de Jesus-Christ*, pp. 213–254.

of some Pauline and Johannine passages. It fails also to take into account the definitely anti-ritualistic teachings of the New Testament ([Matthew 15](#); [Romans 14:17](#); [1 Cor. 1:17, 8:8](#); [Col. 2:16ff](#); [Hebrews 9:10, 13:9ff](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#)). It drastically reverses the balanced relationship which the New Testament establishes between the preached Word, faith, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. The doctrine of a special priesthood of sacramental liturgetes can hardly be harmonized with the biblical data.¹⁹ The fashionable theory of the sacraments as 'memorials', re-enacting the past in the present, lacks proper foundation. We therefore concur with the noted Anglican scholar, Roger T. Beckwith, when he says: p. 88

This pagan Greek notion has, quite incongruously, been read into the Jewish passover ... The theory could never have become popular except by wishful thinking on the part of those who wanted to overcome the great theological and ecumenical problems caused by the notions of bodily presence and the mass-sacrifice, conflicting as they do with the once-for-all finality of Calvary ...²⁰

The *objective* efficacy which Rome attributes to the sacraments, even though it is called 'instrumental' and 'applicatory', implies an intolerable addition to the finished work of Jesus Christ. He has fully accomplished the entire 'objective' side of our salvation. No further sacrifice is needed. The sacraments as works of human merit, which must be mediated through the church, represent a denial of justification by faith alone and an infringement upon the sovereign freedom of God. In the words of Calvin, 'When I baptise, is it as if I had the Holy Spirit up my sleeve to produce at any time? Or the body and blood of the Lord to offer to whom I please? It would be sheer presumption to attribute to mortal creatures what belongs to Jesus Christ.'²¹

At bottom, our evangelical critique of Roman Catholic sacramentology points up the conflict between two opposing views of the Christian faith. Rome sees itself as an extension of the Incarnation, thus divinizing human beings as they cooperate with God's grace which is conferred by the church. Over against this view stands our evangelical commitment to the free gift of righteousness, imputed solely by the grace of God, received by a true faith which answers to God's Word, and based fully upon the once-for-all expiation of guilt through the finished sacrifice of the perfect Substitute, Christ Jesus. This confession is for us the gospel.

IX. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Traditionally Evangelicals have understood their mission basically in terms of evangelization. In predominantly Roman Catholic countries this meant a call to conversion and a change in church affiliation. But the holistic impact of the gospel also played a role in the mission of Evangelicals, taking shape in the daily lives of people, especially among the poor. Contrastingly, Roman Catholic religion generally took the form of popular religiosity, keeping the poor from living as responsible stewards of God and making them victims of exploitation. Evangelicals frequently pointed out the close connection between a P. 89 religiosity based upon a false or incomplete gospel and social exploitation.

¹⁹ As perceived by the modernist E. Schillebeeckx, *Kerkelijk ambt* (Bloemendaal: H. Nelissen, 1980).

²⁰ 'The Ecumenical Quest for Agreement in Faith', *Themelios*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Sept., 1984), p. 29.

²¹ Sermon on [Acts 1:4-5](#), as quoted by Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1953), p 172.

Traditionally the Roman Catholic Church has understood her role in these countries as one of keeping within the fold those who had been baptized. Both her pastoral methodology and the use of social coercion through public institutions were used to this end. Her attitude toward non-Roman communions was then defined in the old inquisitorial way of dealing with error. In some regions of the world isolated cases of persecution still occur—though contrary to the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church.

With the growth of secularism and the rise of liberal governments the Roman Catholic Church has not been able to continue its former approach and can no longer use social means of coercion as it once did. This experience of disestablishment, as well as the self-critical ferment coming after Vatican II, has forced the Roman Catholic Church to revise her understanding of mission in the world. In Latin America and many other areas this has meant a new emphasis on evangelization. This new impetus arises from an awareness that a very small minority within the baptized masses are really practicing Catholics. Interest in the Bible and experiencing the liturgy in the common language of the people has given Roman Catholics a new awareness of some of the basic elements of the Christian faith which had previously been taken for granted or obscured by the ritual.

At the same time a significant sector of the Roman Catholic Church is demanding a radical shift in political alliances on the part of the Church. This call for a 'preferential option for the poor' is basically a call for the church to change its alignment from a close relationship and cooperation with the ruling elites to solidarity with the masses and the poor. Much is at stake for the church in these changes. It remains to be seen what the final outcome of the liberationist ferment will be. Yet neither the liberationist position nor the official Roman reactions to it can be uncritically embraced by Evangelicals. What cannot be denied is the involvement of many priests and nuns in actions of sacrificial service to the poor with all the risks involved in times of social transformation. In this way the Church of Rome has revised her mission in the direction of a more prophetic and critical social role.

Evangelicals generally conceive of their mission first in terms of a call to personal faith in Christ and see their social role as a consequence of this spiritual transformation. From this perspective their evaluation of these new developments in the Roman Catholic Church tends to be negative, coloured by suspicion about its motives and methods. They cannot deny, however, that when they first entered [p. 90](#) a Roman Catholic country, they themselves provided services in medicine, education, and social uplift as part of a holistic ministry. Even today entrance visas into some countries are possible for Evangelicals mainly because of the holistic ministry they perform. As the Lausanne Covenant demonstrates, there is a renewed effort among Evangelicals to understand their mission in a biblical and holistic way, without denying the fundamental human need for the gospel.

Besides stressing our basic commitment to announce the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially to those who have never heard it, we should also understand how to do this faithfully in places where it is only partially known. The biblical movement, the charismatic movement, and the base communities among Roman Catholics are all new developments that should be taken into account in any evangelistic strategy for Evangelicals. It will be to our loss if we minimize the possibilities that some forms of these movements bring with them for more basic changes in the Roman Catholic Church. We should also bear in mind that many independent forms of spiritual experience are possible within Roman Catholicism because of her inability even to retain in the fold those who are baptized, due largely to the lack of clergy and lay mobilization (*Puebla and Beyond*, 76–86).

In the past Evangelicals have in many places been defenders of the separation of church and state, especially as it applies to education. In Roman Catholic dominated countries this has meant the rejection of Roman Catholic dominated educational systems. Today some Evangelicals feel compelled to revise their approach because of the pervasive penetration of non-Christian ideologies into many educational systems and even to consider the possibility of cooperation with Roman Catholics in some aspects of this revision.

A very important aspect of missions has to do with the approach to other religions indigenous to areas where the gospel is introduced. It may be said without fear of contradiction that the Church of Rome views these other religions with greater favour than Evangelicals generally do. In our judgment the Roman Catholic Church has at times taken over pagan customs, altering them on the surface, but incorporating them essentially unchanged into its life. It is not uncommon for Roman Catholics to speak of these pagan views and practices, which in fact often border on the occult, as ‘popular religiosity’ and as stepping-stones to the gospel. To us as Evangelicals this practice amounts to a kind of Christopaganism.²² p. 91

Already in 1659 the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith stated in a letter to the Roman Catholic communities in Southeast Asia:

Never use any force whatsoever, nor employ any means of persuasion to induce those peoples to change their rites, their customs, and their manners of living, unless such be most clearly contrary to religion and to proper behaviour. What could be more absurd than to try to transplant [foreign customs] into China, France, Spain, Italy, or some other European country? It is not this which you should introduce, but the faith, which neither rejects nor destroys the ceremonies and customs of any people, when they are not intrinsically evil, but wants in every way to safeguard and consolidate them.²³

The official view of the Roman Catholic Church concerning other religions (including traditional religions such as tribal, animistic, and ancestral forms of worship, together with Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism) is formulated by Vatican II in the Decree, *Nostra Aetate* (‘In our time’), in the following key statement:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ ([John 14:6](#)), in whom men find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (cf. [2 Cor. 5:18-19](#)).

The Roman Catholic Church holds that these other religions often reflect rays of the Truth and rejects nothing in them that is true and holy (*Ad Gentes*, 2). The Roman Catholic Church therefore exhorts her sons that they ‘prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values of their society and culture’ (*Ad Gentes*, 2). The position of Rome

²² It is worthy of note that the Medellin Conference of Bishops in 1968 criticized this ‘popular religiosity’, but that the Puebla Conference of 1978 reaffirmed it as a form of Christianity.

²³ M. Marcocchi, ‘The instruction of *Propaganda Fidei* to the Apostolic Vicars of East Asia (1659)’, in *Colonialismo cristianesimo e culture extraeuropee* (Milan, 1981), p.80.

is that these religions may provide a preparation for ultimate entrance into the church, wherein salvation must be found.

In an historic event during his visit to Morocco in 1985, John Paul II addressed 60,000 Islamic students at Casablanca. On that occasion he spoke of the differences that divide and the similarities that join Christians and Muslims. Concerning the similarities he said that [p. 92](#)

Abraham is the same model of faith in God for us [a model], of submitting to his will and of confidence in his bounty. We believe in the same God, the only God, the living God, the God who creates world and brings its creatures to perfection.

It would appear from this papal statement that the present Pope sees more than a 'ray of Truth' in Islam. For both Muslims and Christians are said to believe in the only living God.

How do we as Evangelicals respond to Rome's teaching on other religions? We find the carefully guarded language of many of its official statements unobjectionable as they stand. We too would reject nothing which is true and holy, nor do we reject efforts at contextualization. Yet we observe that the historical application of these guidelines often allowed for syncretism with deadly pagan errors and much that was unholy. We discern in this a dangerous underestimation of the sinfulness of natural man and of the activity of the powers of darkness. We are disturbed when the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner speaks of 'anonymous Christianity' (as if people can belong to Christ without naming His name) and when Raymond Panikkar writes of the 'Unknown Christ of Hinduism' or when others speak of a 'latent kingdom' among people of other faiths. Approaches like these clearly negate the finality of Jesus Christ.

There is an incipient unbiblical universalism in Rome's view of these other religions. In 1949 the Holy Office pointed out that those who live good lives and follow the Truth as they know it have 'an implicit desire' for faith, which is sufficient for salvation.²⁴ There is then, according to the teaching of Rome, a universality of divine grace, even among those who do not know Christ. As Jadot says, there is 'the divinely inspired possibility of salvation also for atheists and agnostics'.²⁵

What such views call for is not an outright rejection of the teachings and customs of the other religions, but dialogue and collaboration with them. At the same time the Church of Rome invites the adherents of other religions to believe the gospel.

We believe that the position of the Roman Catholic Church vis-a-vis these other religions stands in basic contradiction to the message of the gospel. Yet Rome does maintain the necessity of proclaiming the gospel. For it holds that incipient faith must be brought to fruition; the anonymous Christ must be made fully known. Since it has abandoned the biblical position, however, the Roman Catholic Church has [p. 93](#) assumed a very positive attitude toward non-Christian religions in some areas of the world and has accordingly baptized many people whose lives are still largely entangled in pagan thought and practice.

We as Evangelicals take strong exception to all such ideas of a 'Christ incognito', an 'anonymous Christianity', a 'latent kingdom', an incipient faith which is sufficient unto salvation, and a universalism which includes agnostics and atheists. For 'every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God' ([1 John 4:3](#)).

²⁴ John L. Jadot, 'The Growth in Roman Catholic Commitment to Interreligious Dialogue Since Vatican II', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:3, Summer 1983, p. 369.

²⁵ Idem., p. 371

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In our evaluation of Roman Catholicism we have endeavoured to be true to the evangelical faith and honest and fair to the Church of Rome. Our submission to the Scriptures requires of us to hold high the cardinal truths of the historic apostolic faith as proclaimed anew in the 16th century Reformation of *sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, sola Christo*, all to the glory of God.

Standing in that faith we have encountered obstacles in Roman Catholicism as it manifests itself today, which seriously impede fellowship and cooperation between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics and are unsurmountable as long as there is no fundamental reformation according to the Word of God in the Church of Rome. It is our fervent prayer that such a reformation may take place. Unity and cooperation among Christians is highly desirable, but not at the expense of the fundamental evangelical truths that have been stated in this document. There is only one way. As has been said, only as we all draw closer to Christ can we draw closer to each other ([Eph. 4:16](#)). The road that beckons is not 'come back to Rome', nor 'come across to Wittenburg or Geneva', but 'come together in Jerusalem', the historical-redemptive anchor point of the Christian faith.

We acknowledge that Roman Catholicism today is not a monolithic body and that there are notable differences between the popular religiosity of its members and the elaborate theological explanations of its dogma. Moreover, the scarcity of priests and the loss of social control in many areas of the world allows for many things to happen at the local level, apart from hierarchical control. There is also a wide variety of national situations which account for a variety of experiences among Evangelicals themselves in their contacts with Roman Catholics.

In our service of the Lord Jesus Christ and His church and in our obedience to our call to mission, especially where contacts with Roman Catholics are involved, we should keep in mind the findings of this study and the multiplicity of situations in which we live and work. [p. 94](#)

In an effort to evaluate recent developments in Roman Catholicism, we have given expression to our evangelical convictions. The times in which we live call for a renewed understanding and appreciation of our evangelical heritage. Biblical imperatives demand of us consistency of behaviour in relation to the evangelical truths in our personal lives, in our churches and in our positions in society.

We are constrained by the commission of our Lord ([II Cor. 5:18-20](#)) and by the love of Christ ([II Cor. 5:14](#)) to proclaim the gospel to all people, including those who are Roman Catholic.

We would like to think that this Perspective on Roman Catholicism will provide the basis for a consensus among all the evangelical fellowships which constitute the World Evangelical Fellowship.

We make the prayer of the Apostle Paul our prayer, 'May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' ([Romans 15:5, 6](#)). [p. 95](#)

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