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Editorial Our Theological and Missiological Task

At the WEF Theological Commission consultation held in London, April 9–14 1996 on the theme, 'Faith and Hope for the Future: Towards a Vital and Coherent Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century' six regional perspectives were presented in plenary sessions. We are pleased to make these available to you in this issue of ERT. The two opening addresses by Bong Rin Ro and your Editor are also included. The consultation gave further priority to 12 working groups on crucial issues in our present and future global contexts. The reports of two of these groups are included. A full report will follow.

One of the participants, Guillermo Cook of Costa Rica noted, 'I was quite struck by the absence of "culture" among the 12 categories for small group discussion ... The four "Two Thirds World" world contributors were more culturally aware than the "One Third World" writers. This is quite natural because North Americans and Europeans take their culture as normative.' It is clear that as a global evangelical community we have still a long way to go to develop a living and coherent theology to respond to the crucial issues of the 21st century and to be relevant to the plurality of our national and regional contexts. But we are not alone. The President of the WCC at the last General Assembly (held in Canberra) confessed that the ecumenical movement has not yet found a vital and coherent theology to meet the needs of the future.

In the oft-repeated words of the Church historian, T.R. Glover, the early Church 'outthought, outlived and outdied the pagan world'.

This, too, is our theological and missiological task. [p. 292](#)

Faith and Hope for the Future

Thomas Oden

You have commanded us, O Lord, to watch and pray, that we enter not into temptation. If we could endow ourselves with this gift merely by willing it, we would not be asking it in prayer. If the will sufficed to prevent us from entering into temptation, we would not have to pray for it. But if we were not given a will at all, we would be unable to pray. So grant us then that we pray rightly that we enter not into temptation, and by willing it let us pray that we may be made able to do what we have willed, when by your grace we have attained to right discernment. Amen. (adapted from Augustine, Letters, 218 FC 32:98).

I feel deeply honoured to be asked to speak to this distinguished evangelical colloquy on how the faith once delivered to the saints is to be rightly guarded, reasonably championed, and wisely advocated in our special historic situation. I find it useful to divide this broad assignment into several consequential, specific decisive apologetic issues:

1. Is the willingness to suffer for Truth intrinsic to the Christian understanding of Truth?
2. How is the concept of the non-Christian World best understood Evangelically?

3. What is happening in the Confessing Evangelical Movements within the North American Mainline?
4. Is the History of Exegesis recoverable after a century of Reductionist Historicism?
5. At what point will Evangelicals learn to kick the Post out of an Ultramodernity disguised as Postmodern?
6. Whither Postmodern Paleoorthodoxy: Where is the Holy Spirit leading Evangelical Apologetics?
7. Will the Church endure? Reappraising the question of Indefectibility
8. Have Evangelicals outlived the Dissolution of Modernity?
9. Why are the emerging authentically [p. 293](#) Postmodern Evangelicals called Young Fogeys?
10. Why is Paleo-orthodoxy so cross-culturally agile?
11. Can we retrieve the Canon?
12. What about those who choose to be liberated from Classic Christianity?

We are attempting to answer these questions within the framework of the *consensum fidelium*, attentive to two millennia of classic Christian exegesis, amid a great cloud of witnesses.

1. IS THE WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER FOR TRUTH INTRINSIC TO THE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF TRUTH?

Is the willingness to put one's body on the line for the truth an indispensable premise of the unadorned concept of truth in apostolic testimony? To speak of truth without willingness to suffer for the truth is backhandedly to debase the truth.

No Christian teacher is worth listening to who is not willing to suffer, if necessary, for the truth that is being taught ([1 Pet. 4:13-5:9](#); *The Martyrdom of Polycarp. Ante-Nicene Fathers*, hereafter ANF. [1:37-44](#)). The readiness to suffer for the sake of the truth is intrinsic to the whole fabric of Christian living, and hence teaching, and thus not an optional part of the equipping of the public teacher of Christianity ([Phil. 3:10](#); Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, ANF, V:437-47; Kierkegaard, *Attack on 'Christendom'*).

Paul's teaching was personally validated by his willingness to be 'exposed to hardship, even to the point of being shut up like a common criminal; but the word of God is not shut up' ([2 Tim. 2:9](#)). Some hearers will find in the truth of the one who was 'nailed to the cross' merely a 'stone of stumbling' and 'folly' ([1 Cor. 1:23](#); cf. [Rom. 8:17, 18](#)). Jesus did not hesitate to make it clear that his disciples must be prepared to 'be handed over for punishment and execution; and men of all nations will hate you for your allegiance to me' ([Matt. 24:9](#); Irenaeus, *Ag. Her. IV.33.9*, ANF 1:508).

The truth, Christianly understood, is an event in history, a birth, death, and resurrection, God's own personal coming to us in mercy and grace, a Word spoken through a personal life lived, a personal event in which we are called personally to participate. To tell the truth rightly is to follow the one who is truth.

The 'right method' for guarding Christian truth was deftly set forth in Luther's three concise instructions: *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*—first by prayer, and by textual meditation, but decisively by suffering temptation and the experience of *Anfechtung* (by testing through affliction). Listen to him poignantly acknowledge how much he owed to his enemies. 'Through the raging of the devil they have so buffeted, distressed, and terrified me that they have made me a fairly good theologian, which I would not have become without them' (Luther, *What Luther Says*, III, pp. 1 1358-60*; cf. preface to Wittenberg ed., *Luther's Works 34*, pp. 283-88). [p. 294](#)

2. HOW IS THE CONCEPT OF THE 'NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD' BEST UNDERSTOOD EVANGELICALLY?

The premise of much evangelical missiology is that we live in a post-Christian or non-Christian world. In what sense is the world in which we are privileged to attest grace rightly described as a 'non-Christian world'? 'Non-Christian world' cannot mean that the world which is God's gift now exists without God. It cannot mean that the work of the Spirit is totally eclipsed or dysfunctional within the estranged world, just because it has been wilfully spurned. It cannot mean that the world lacks the presence of the crucified and risen Son by the power of the Spirit, or the governance of the all-wise triune God.

It can mean only the world that has defiantly decided to proceed as if the Incarnate Lord had not come in our midst, and has no abiding relevance for the world. It can mean only, for Christian apologetic reasoning, that a world is falsely posited by unbelievers which lacks the justifying grace of the Son and from which the sanctifying fruits of the Spirit are spurned and rejected. It can only point to a world which lives in despair, not realizing the offer of redeeming love by the Incarnate living God. It lives already under the judgement of the Holy One whose judgement will be made complete on the last day.

'Post-Christian' cannot mean a world that is left when Christian testimony is permanently silenced. The actual fallen world, the ongoing cosmos that runs on twenty-four hour standard daylight time, is still in the process of being reconciled and its sin overcome by the crucified and risen Redeemer. 'Actual fallen world' refers to a situation in which a penultimate prodigal world has not yet come to itself in repentance and faith, an actual world that still despairs over its failure to come freely into the presence of God's mercy.

Missiology and apologetics within that sort of posited world must be careful not to take that world in its fallenness more seriously than it takes that world's decisive redemption. Christian mission within that sort of world which is hypothesized as if it were still unmet by the living God, as if it were still awaiting the Christ, must take care not to be swallowed up by the power of the unredeemed imagination as to its own finality.

To reify is to treat an abstraction as if it actually existed, to attribute reality to something. The reification of the concept, 'non-Christian world', or post-Christian culture' invites the critical qualifier that the world is and remains God's, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son that all who believe on him might have eternal life. This world is already the recipient of God's saving redemption in Jesus Christ, a gift given for all and appropriable by all who repent and believe. Christian apologetics in the heat of its temporal struggle amid the fallen world is forever tempted to overestimate the fleeting temporary power of that fallen world.

Christian apologetics has the privilege of speaking to the fallen world not merely in reference to fallen humanity's skewed assumptions [p. 295](#) about itself, but even more in reference to God's own assumption of humanity in the Incarnate Lord, the event of divine-human reconciliation and through the death and resurrection of the eternal Son. This communication always takes place within a particular Zeitgeist. But the Zeitgeist cannot itself dictate the terms of salvation, or redefine the vocabulary of the apostolic testimony, so that one concedes to the Zeitgeist the absolute truth of all its premises, many of which are false, and only then begins to seek despairingly to find some tiny opening for the light of Christian truth. That is not contextualization but abandonment of mission.

Christian apologetics, like Christian caregiving, has the task of reaching out for the fallen and hungry precisely where they are fallen and hungry, yet without encouraging the demonic pretence that this fallenness is the last word.

Because of its specific commission to communicate with the fallen world in its own language. Christian apologetics is continually tempted to be overly awed by the very power and vitality of the fallen world which the mercy of God is acting to redeem. When this happens the world is inordinately magnified, not God. With the best of intentions such efforts may tend to lead us to forget the incomparable power of the one who has acted decisively to save the world from its falseness. By giving excessive attention to the transient power of the fallen world, the fatigued apologist may be drawn into becoming inattentive to the majesty of that One from whom all things come and into whom all things return, in whose constant love there is no shadow of change or turning. Under the noble fantasy of taking the world absolutely seriously, grace becomes inadvertently trivialized.

Faith encounters that conjectured world with the real world as God's gift, a fallen world which has been redeemed. The apostolic testimony within that real world does better to offer its own gifts to the world than to borrow hungrily from the world's despairing self-understanding. This requires apologetics to attend to its own texts and share its own distinctive gifts. Faith need not be thrown off track by the presumed vitality of a dying world, the imagined power of an evanescent world.

Another aspect of my assignment in concluding this series of plenary sessions is to try to survey and describe the evangelical situation in North America. So I want to focus now upon a special vital part of that arena by asking:

3. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE CONFESSING EVANGELICAL MOVEMENTS WITHIN THE NORTH AMERICAN 'OLDLINE' OR 'MAINLINE'?

I speak as an evangelical apologist within North American mainline Protestantism. By mainline Protestantism I mean those communions whose leadership has for several decades been deeply entangled in cultural accommodations, doctrinal softening, hypertolerance in Christology, and in many cases political rnessianism, utopian social experimentalism, protomarxian economic **P. 296** conjectures, absolute egalitarian sentimentalism, bureaucratic ecumenism, and the idealized fantasies of control-economies.

I speak particularly and penitently of my own United Methodist Church, but the same observations apply to evangelical witness within the Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Canada, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Episcopalians and to some lesser degree the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. In each of these communions there has been a three-decade radical haemorrhaging of vitality, membership, and witness. But more promising in the longer view, within each there is an active movement of the Holy Spirit, and a growing renewal of classic Christian teaching, a confession movement, such as the Confessing Movement Within the United Methodist Church, Disciples for Renewal, Pro Ecclesia, Christians for Biblical Renewal, Presbyterians for Renewal, and the reform movement within the United Church of Canada.

These scripture-centred accountability movements are at this juncture of history relatively small but gaining rapid momentum. Their journals are thriving. The expectation is increasing that they may soon affect major theological and polity reforms within the oldline. Every event which attempts to re-imagine God in reductionist terms as a bland reflection of modernity's excesses serves only as an encouragement to these resistance movements and stimulates their determination to confess anew the Sonship and Lordship of Jesus Christ with nonsyncretistic clarity.

Hence these times call not merely for the generation of moral outrage and the repetition of negative grievances, but for asking how the Spirit is calling the faithful within

academic and church communities to work together constructively toward practically reclaiming stolen church properties, bureaucracies, and renegade ecclesial establishments.

The promising future of North American mainline Protestant evangelicals has potentially grace-laden repercussions for the future of both Catholic and Orthodox traditions the world over. And a deepened, chastened, penitent new conversation between Evangelicals who are inside the mainline churches and those Evangelicals in the dissenting traditions is being prepared by the Holy Spirit. Most promising is the potential dialogue between Reformed evangelicals and Anglican-Wesleyan tradition evangelicals, who are learning better to listen less defensively to each other.

Can classic Christians and evangelicals and confessors of apostolic faith within the mainline churches come together cooperatively to form a plausible accord which effectively resists the apostacizing temptations so endemic within the mainline? Can they unite with a credible and viable agenda for reclaiming the church and rescuing it from its slippery doctrinal slopes? Can a trajectory be set that will neither slide toward heterodoxy and imprudence nor become inwardly turned toward resentment and reactionary defensiveness? Can those who hold steadfastly to classic [p. 297](#) Christian teaching find a hopeful voice to challenge the long dominant hegemony of doctrinal latitudinarians, hypertolerantists, egalitarian activist, neopagan liturgists, and process pantheists? Can loyal stay-inners cope with ongoing temptations to walk away and abandon the struggle? These questions are being confronted at a thousand different levels.

A massive moral crisis is now facing the deteriorating liberal mainline church leadership, its academic institutions, bureaucracies and local churches. It is time to recover a common vision sharable by evangelicals, moderates and traditionalists for repossession of those church institutions that have been either abandoned or neglected or in some cases ideologically hijacked. It is time to set feasible goals for the rehabilitation of a tradition-deprived church.

I know that many of you are not connected in any way, even sentimentally, to the North American oldline-mainline. You feel yourselves spared these dilemmas. You have no obligation to fight these battles. But analogous battles are being fought in all Christian ministries.

I have no interest here in boasting of the achievements of the mainline, particularly at this juncture of history, which so radically calls us all to repentance. I do not speak in a triumphalist tone in the presence of those of evangelical traditions who do not relate to the mainline establishment or identify in any way with liberal church institutions. I wish only to communicate what a great work God the Spirit is doing among evangelicals within these churches, and hope it will hearten you wherever you serve.

4. IS THE HISTORY OF EXEGESIS RECOVERABLE AFTER A CENTURY OF REDUCTIONIST HISTORICISM?

The Holy Spirit has a history. When this history is systematically forgotten, it is incumbent upon evangelical guardianship to recover it by new rigorous historical effort. This is why the apologetic task for biblical studies in our time must focus in a deliberate way upon the early history of exegesis. We have a right to learn from the reasonings and arguments that have sustained Christian textual interpretations and spiritual formation through many previous modernities, especially in their earliest prototypical forms. The canonical text has a history of interpretation which has been systematically ignored in the last century of historicist investigation.

Evangelical scholarship is already assailed by the temptation to allow itself to be dominated by reductionist 19th century historicist models of interpretation which approach the text by denying that it could be the revealed Word of God. To overcome this, evangelicals are conspicuously taking the lead in recovering the history of exegesis among the guild of biblical scholars.

This is why most of the rest of my life will be primarily devoted to editing a twenty-seven volume *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. Its goals are: the renewal of Christian preaching based on classical Christian exegesis, the intensified [p. 298](#) study of Scripture by lay persons who wish to think with the early church about the canonical text, and the stimulation of Christian historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral scholars toward further inquiry into the exegesis of the ancient Christian writers.

This verse by verse commentary will consist of carefully chosen selections in dynamic equivalent English translation from the ancient Christian writers of the first eight centuries. Texts are now being selected by an international team of experts out of the ancient Christian tradition from Clement of Rome to John of Damascus, ranging through the early centuries of Christian exegesis (100–750 AD). We are making accessible the most penetrating patristic passages on Scripture, pericope by pericope. Our selections will feature both the varieties of classic Christian exegetical argumentation and their overarching cohesion grounded in ecumenical consensual exegetical reasoning. In this way, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox audiences will be served and renewed by this commentary.

This work stands in the early medieval catena tradition of patristic exegesis, and will benefit by utilizing and adapting that tradition in appropriate ways. This after-modern effort has antecedents in Eastern Orthodox and in seventeenth century Lutheran and Reformed inheritors of the tradition of the *glossa ordinaria*. It will offer, for the first time in this century, the earliest Christian comments and reflections on all Old and New Testament texts to a modern pastoral and lay audience.

Translations will be made afresh where needed; insofar as current English translations are adequate, they will be used, and where adequate but archaic they will be modernized.

On each page the scripture text will be presented in the centre surrounded by well-referenced direct quotations of comments of key consensual early Christian exegetes. The most succinct way to visualize this is to picture the printed text of the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic arguments and comments of the same period as the patristic writers, surrounding and explicating the texts of the sacred tradition.

Modern preaching has remained largely bereft of easily accessible patristic exegetical resources. This series will provide the pastor, lay reader, exegete, and student with convenient means to see what Athanasius or John Chrysostom or Leo the Great said about a particular text for preaching, for study, or for meditation.

How are these early exegetes viewed in the early evangelical revivalist tradition? The Fathers are ‘the most authentic commentators on Scripture, as being both nearest the fountain, and eminently endued with the Spirit by whom all Scripture was given ... I speak chiefly of those who wrote before the Council of Nice. But who would not likewise desire to have some acquaintance with those that followed them? with St Chrysostom, Basil, Jerome, Austin [Augustine]; and above all, the man of a broken heart, Ephraim Syrus?’ (John Wesley, ‘Address to the Clergy’, *Works*, i.2, X.484; cf. *Journals of John Wesley*, hereafter [p. 299](#) *JW*, 3:390). The exegesis of the church fathers is especially helpful in ‘the *explication* of a doctrine that is not sufficiently explained, or for *confirmation* of a doctrine generally received’ (Wesley, *A Roman Catechism, with a Reply, Preface*, *Works*, X:87, italics added; cf. *JW* 1:367).

5. ON KICKING THE POST OUT OF ULTRAMODERNITY

This leads us to ask: When nostalgic ultramodernity poses as trendy postmodernity, what apologetic responses are fitting for evangelicals? At what point will evangelicals learn to kick the post out of a fatigued ultramodernity camouflaging as postmodernity?

The term post-modernity is still being used by ultramoderns as if the assumptions of modernity were going to continue forever. Post-modernity in their sense refers only to an intensification of the despairing messianism of modernity.

Modernity is the period, the ideology, and the malaise of the time from 1789 to 1989, from the Bastille to the Berlin Wall. The gawky, ungainly term *post-modern* points ironically to the course of actual hazardous history following the death of modernity. The period after modernity is a required course for evangelicals who attest the risen Lord amid a dying culture.

The evangelical response to postmodernity was well established long before 1980, well before anyone had heard of Derrida or Foucault. In 1979 the text of *Agenda for Theology* clearly documented an emergent, hopeful pre-eighties evangelical post-modern community of discourse. As early as the sixties some of us were trying to speak to the 'new breed of spirit questers' in the post-modern situation, amid 'the maturing twentieth century' (Oden, *Structure of Awareness*, 1968, 15, 275).

Already by the late seventies, before the post-modern fad of the eighties, I was attempting to differentiate sharply between modernity, later-stage modernity ('third quarter of the twentieth century'), and postmodernity, ('preparing to enter the third millennium'), as I looked toward the emergence of a 'Postmodern orthodoxy, having been immersed in the deteriorations of later stage modernity, now reawakened to the power and beauty of classical Christianity, seeking to incorporate the achievements of modernity into an ethos and intellectus that transcends modernity under the guidance of ancient ecumenical Christianity'. That was the 'agenda for theology', as I saw it, in 1979, and it remains so for many more today than in 1979. 'This is what I mean by postmodern orthodoxy. Its spirit is embodied in the student who has been through the rigours of university education, often through the hazards of the drug scene, through the ups and downs of political engagement, through the head shrinks and group thinks of popular therapies, and through a dozen sexual messianisms, only to become weary of the pretentious motions of frenetic change. Finally they have come on Christ's living presence in the world in an actual community of Christians and now have set out to understand what has [p. 300](#) happened to them in the light of the classical texts of scripture and tradition' (Oden, *Agenda for Theology*, hereafter *AFT*, 1979, 5). 'The agenda for theology in the last quarter of the twentieth century following the steady deterioration of a hundred years and the disaster of the last two decades, is to begin to prepare the post-modern Christian community for its third millennium by returning again to the careful study and respectful following of the central tradition of classical Christianity' (*AFT*: 31).

Then belatedly, after 1980 came Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty with a weaker, thinner, chic definition of post-modernity, which caught the imagination of ultramodern academics in literary and hermeneutic theory. It was only then that the popular press caught sight of the concept of post-modernity according to this later despairing ultramodern definition. Since the media elites have controlled this definition since the early 1980s, it has intruded itself belatedly upon theological dialogue as if normative. I appeal to you to return to the pre-eighties definition of post-modernity which is evangelically more hopeful, culturally more realistic, and providentially more circumspect.

When evangelicals today hear talk of post-modernity by avant garde academics, there is no longer any reason to break out in a sweat. The cure is easy: just quietly strike out the *post* and mentally insert *ultra*. That is what I call kicking the post out of ultramodernity.

Where post-modern has become a euphemism for ultramodern, paleo-Christians do not mind making a little jest over the difference. Where the value assumptions of modernity are nostalgically idealized, and where ancient wisdoms are compulsively disparaged, you have only a thinly veneered ultra-modernity, even where it calls itself post-modernity. It is like a moth winging frantically and circling ever closer to the flame of instant death.

The ploy is to make modern value assumptions appear eternal by coopting them in what is called postmodernity. This post-modern toupee may look fetching and neat but underneath there is sparse growth with no powers of regeneration. The deconstructionist mask may look brave but it doesn't fit and the knees are quaking and there is a grimace in the smile. The nameplate may say post-modern but the intellectus was patented in the Enlightenment. The subterfuge is based on the deceit of trying to make the key values of corrupted modernity appear permanent by endowing them with the fake label post-modern. It is a cover up that the liberal investigative journalists have not even begun to grasp, and are too intimidated to investigate.

6. WHITHER POST-MODERN PALEO-ORTHODOXY: WHERE IS THE HOLY SPIRIT LEADING EVANGELICAL APOLOGETICS?

Post-modernity in its paleo-orthodox definition is simply that period that follows the time span from 1789 to 1989 which characteristically embraced an enlightenment world view that cast an ideological **P. 301** spell over our times, now in grave moral spinout.

The spinout phase of late modernity is epitomized by the reductive naturalism of Freud which is no longer marketable as an effective therapy, the idealistic historical utopianism of Marx which is now internally collapsing from St Petersburg to Havana, the narcissistic assertiveness of Nietzsche which is drastically cutting life expectancy on urban streets, and the modern chauvinism typified by Feuerbach, Dewey, and Bultmann that imagines the ethos of late modernity to be the unquestioned cultural norm that presumes to judge all premodern texts and ideas. Under the tutelage of these once brave modern ideologies so touted by the liberal media elites, sex has been reduced to orgasm, persons to bodies, psychology to stimuli, economics to planning mechanisms, and politics to machinery. These malfunctioning ideologies are today everywhere in crisis, even while still being fawned over by isolated church bureaucratic elitists.

These tired, fading modern illusions are woven together in an ideological temperament that still sentimentally shapes the oldline liberal Protestant ethos, especially its politicized bureaucracies and academies, who remain largely unprepared to grasp either their own vulnerability or their divine calling and possibility within this decisive historical opportunity.

The Marxist-Leninism of the Soviet era is now gone; the Freudian idealization of sexual liberation has found it easier to make babies than parent them morally; the children of the post-psychoanalytic culture are at peril; the truculence of Nietzschean nihilism has spread to the bloody banks of Bosnian and Cambodian and Rwandan and Ukrainian rivers with a trail of genocide along the way; the modern chauvinism of once-confident Bultmannians is now moribund since the modernity they expected never arrived.

These once-assured ideologies are now unmasked as having a dated vision of the human possibility; for none has succeeded in engendering a transmissible intergenerational culture. Since each of these ideological programmes has colluded with

the other, they are now falling synchronously down like tottering dominoes: the command economies, the backfiring therapeutic experiments, the patient-abusing therapists, the mythical fantasies of demythology, interpersonal fragments of drug experimentation, the exploding splinters of narcissism, and their wholly owned ecclesial subsidiaries, their theological hirelings and flunkies. If the Freudian project, the Bultmannian project, the Marxist project, and the Nietzschean project are all functionally moribund, then later stage modernity is dead in the regenerative sense. That is what is meant by the phrase 'terminal modernity'. In a despairing search for a social utopia, we have blundered our way into the black hole of a social counter-utopia.

Renewed classic Christians are now being awakened and energized by this dawning realization: the Holy Spirit is determined to continue making alive the body of Christ. It is only on the falsely-hypothesized premise of the default of the Holy Spirit that the called-out people p. 302 might seem at times to be coming to nothing. The demise of the church is the least likely premise in the Christian understanding of history.

Those who willingly enslave themselves to passing idolatries should not be surprised when these gods are found to have clay feet. When beloved modern systems die, the idolaters understandably grieve and feel angry and frustrated. Meanwhile the grace-enabled community can celebrate the passage through and beyond modernity, and celebrate the intricate providences of history in which each dying formation is giving birth to new forms and refreshing occasions for living responsively in relation to grace.

What is happening today is a profound rediscovery of the texts, apologetic methods, and pastoral wisdom of the long-neglected patristic exegetical tradition. For many evangelicals this means especially the eastern church fathers of the first five Christian centuries, which never suffered as deeply as did western medieval Catholicism from the distortions of speculative scholasticism.

What is happening in this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian Scripture and the consensual exegetical guides of the formative period of scriptural interpretation. Postmodern paleoorthodox disciples are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of modernity, and having become disillusioned with the illusions of modernity, are again studying the word of God made known in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial texts for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating and reconciling community of pardon.

7. WILL THE CHURCH ENDURE? REAPPRAISING THE QUESTION OF INDEFECTIBILITY

The decisive theological issue is the durability and indefectibility of the true church amid proximate temporary apostasy. This is the doctrinal issue that most deeply affects our moral courage and our ability to relate to this cultural opportunity within what is sometimes mistakenly said to be a post-Christian world: the indefectibility of the church that lives by the power of the Spirit. This is a theme well articulated by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, and Cranmer, and now is a fitting time for orthodox Christians to rediscover it. Classic Christian apologetics is once again being called to reclaim the apostolic teaching of the perpetuity, imperishability and indefectibility of the church. The one, holy, apostolic church the world over is promised imperishable continuance, even if particular associations and groupings of apostate Christian ministries may languish, falter, or atrophy.

Although the church in some dissolute times and places appears virtually extinct, becoming 'so obscured and defaced that the Church seems almost quite razed out', 'yet, in

the meantime, the Lord has in this world, even in this darkness, his true worshippers] (Second Helvetic Confession; [1 Kings 19:18](#); [Rev. 7:4, 9](#)). The foundation is standing sure and the Lord knows [p. 303](#) who are his ([2 Tim. 2:9](#)). And there are seven thousand who have not bowed their knee to Baal. We are being offered a new opportunity to rediscover this remnant by observing the tenacious church in China following the Cultural Revolution the heroic church in Cuba amid the disintegration of Fidelismo, and the church in the former Soviet Union.

The church's future is finally left not to human willing or chance, but to the work of the Spirit and divine grace. Many branches of the seasonally changing vine may drop off in the varied storms and seasons of cultural histories. Once vital ideas and institutions may become dysfunctional and atrophy. But the church as the body of Christ will be preserved till the end of time. It is a Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, Wesleyan and Baptist tenet that the destiny of the believing church is eternally secure. Faith remains the crucial condition of participating in this secure promise, but is not to be asserted so as to deny the power of the Holy Spirit to prevail over disbelief in God's own time.

Though individual believers may come to shipwreck, and even centuries of deteriorating traditions may lose their bearings during particular periods of confusion and crisis, the church as the body of Christ is being guided by the Holy Spirit and sustained by grace until the end ([John 16:6, 13](#)). God will not be left without witnesses in the world ([Acts 14:17](#)). 'One holy Christian church will be and remain forever' (Augsburg Confession, Art. VII). According to my own church's traditional Order for Receiving Persons into the Church: 'the Church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the promotion of his worship and the due administration of his Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies'—a phrase I learned by heart in the earliest days of my ministry.

Meanwhile the church that sails on the turbulent seas of history continues to be vulnerable to those hazards that accompany historical existence generally. The Holy Spirit does not abandon the ever-formative Christian tradition amid these earthly struggles. God supplies that grace of perseverance by which the church is enabled to remain Christ's living body even while being challenged by infirmities, forgetfulness, apostasy, persecution and schism. The believing community is being preserved to 'proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' ([1 Cor. 11:26](#)). Against the church 'the gates of hell shall not prevail', Jesus declared, according to Matthew's gospel ([16:18](#), KJV; cf. [Luke 1:33](#); [1 Tim. 3:15](#)). This means that the church will never decline into total forgetfulness, since it is guided by the Spirit who promises always to accompany the faithful ([John 14:16](#); [Matt. 23:20](#)), even when short term ecclesial accountancy procedures do not add up, and management techniques show poor yields. The church insofar as it is guided by the Spirit does not ever fall entirely away from the fundamental truth of faith or into irretrievable error. She is preserved by [p. 304](#) grace, not by human craft or numbers or political skill ([Matt. 7:25](#)).

Despite temporary real and devastating apostasies, it is unthinkable that God would allow the church finally to become absolutely and continuously apostate or to lose all touch with the righteousness which Christ has once for all bestowed upon her. 'For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For "All men are like grass", but "the word of the Lord stands forever". And this is the word that was preached to you' ([1 Pet. 1:24, 25](#); cf. Calvin, *Commentaries*, XXII: 57–60). The promise of indefectibility is not given to a particular congregation or disciplinary approach or polity or denomination or generation or a

passing period of history, but rather to the whole church to preserve her from fundamental error in the long course of history—to the end ([Matt. 28:20](#); cf. Longer Catechism of the Eastern Orthodox Church).

Insofar as the faithful are sustained by pure Word and Sacrament, adhering to the ‘faith once delivered’, their eucharistic sacrifice, Christ’s own self-giving to redeem sin, is received by God as faultless (Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation*, IV.2,7; John Chrysostom, *On Eutropius; Confession of Dositheus*, 10–12). The Second Helvetic Confession saliently captured this affirmation for Reformed believers, that the church ‘does not err, so long as it relies upon the rock Christ, and upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles’. Insofar as ‘she lets herself be taught by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God’, Calvin argued ‘the church cannot err in things necessary for salvation’ (Inst. 4.8.13). Though particular assemblies may lapse, relapse, or collapse, the elect people of God will not fall away from salvation, because of the Spirit’s guidance.

All those called and elected will not be allowed to err at the same time. This is not a conclusion of an optimistic anthropology but a doctrine grounded in the work of the Spirit. While grace does not coerce belief, neither can it ever be defeated in any given era of the church. It is unthinkable that God would create the church at great cost, only to let it fall finally into permanent or irremediable error. Thus indefectibility is a teaching more of the power of the Holy Spirit than of the self-sufficiency of human imagination or of the strategic wisdom of the church as a sociological entity.

Jesus promised disciples of all times that the Holy Spirit will ‘teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you’ ([John 14:26](#)). Always some seed of faith remains buried in the ashes even of the most divided and corrupt ecclesial remnant. Sometimes such seeds may seem to survive marginally as semi-endangered species, as scattered all too thinly throughout a particular weed-infested culture, as relics of former vitalities of previous covenant communities. Yet wherever Word and Sacrament are being faithfully transmitted and delivered, they are never without effect, for ‘my word’ shall ‘not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire’ ([Is. 55:11](#)), says the Lord. p. 305

Classical Protestantism affirms that ‘the church does not err’ in the sense that the whole church does not at any given time err, and it does not err in the foundation, even if in temporary and non-essential ways it may (Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*). Classic Protestants argue that the church is ultimately sure or certain or indefectible (asphales) insofar as it clings to the revealed word. Yet this does not diminish the recognition that still amid the history of sinful mankind the visible church is ever prone to forgetfulness and fallibility. Nonetheless, that community which is being called into being by the Holy Spirit will not be found falling irretrievably into apostasy, so as to make it impossible for all subsequent generations to hear the gospel. Yet this does not imply that the church is secure from making mistakes or errors of judgement. The relative fallibility of the church in time is itself a stable Protestant dogma.

Since fallible persons are the recipients of God’s saving grace (for the healthy do not need a physician; [Mark 2:17](#)), as long as the church exists within the conditions of the history of sinful mankind, the church will be prone to becoming distorted and vulnerable to those who wish to use it for their own purposes. Until the consummation of salvation history when the incurably wicked will be cut off from the living vine, the community of called out people will be blemished and distorted.

To flee from the scene of human corruption would be to flee from the church’s own arena of mission and servant ministry. But in so far as it is truly the body of Christ living in faith, hope, and love under the lifegiving power of the Spirit, the church can never become absolutely or finally or fatally corrupted ([Matt. 16:18](#)).

Among the diseases of sin that continue to plague and restrict its full growth are: the partisan spirit that would divide it, the heretical spirit that would lead it to distort or forget apostolic teaching, the antinomian spirit that turns Christian liberty into libertinism, the legalistic spirit that would turn grace into law, the naturalistic spirit that would treat grace as a determinant of nature. Despite these infirmities and challenges, which are permitted by a kind Providence to strengthen the church and enable it to grow stronger, the body lives on, the vine sends forth new shoots, the Spirit enlivens and heals, the Head continues to guide and order the whole organism ([John 15:1-5](#); [Col. 1:18](#)).

The continuing renewal of ecclesial life never comes by avoiding sinners, for their redemption is the reason why the church exists. Clean-handed purists of all periods tend to flee the task of serving sinners, unlike Jesus who mixed with them, ate and drank with those most despicable and rejected, and profoundly identified with all sinners on the cross. The body of Christ continues to struggle against tendencies toward a Montanism that would exclude sinners based on their lack of Spirit, a Donatism which would exclude sinners based upon inauthentic ministry or regionalism, and a purist Novatian rigorism which would exclude sinners based upon their moral deficiencies.

The ecumenical councils and [p. 306](#) major consensual teachers attest the ultimate indefectibility of the church as a gift of grace (Council of Nicea, Basil, *Letter 114*; Gregory Nazianzen, *On the Great Athanasius, Orat. XXI*; Cyril, *Letter 39*). The patristic exegetes pointed to the councils as evidence of the assent of the whole church. It is this universal consent that is said to be reliable, and finally indefectible.

While the Holy Spirit is the actuating principle of this indefectibility, the consent of the general laity is given as an evidence of unity and the central criterion of ecumenicity. The Holy Spirit does not introduce new or post-apostolic doctrine through the conciliar process, but rather acts to illuminate and guard from error the original apostolic witness. This occurs not as if mechanically actuated by the Spirit, but working in a normal human manner through debate, inquiry, parliamentary deliberation, voting, and the apparatus of policy formation.

The history of the church is not one of uninterrupted progress of ekstasis, without challenge or chastisement. Pascal in *Pensées* pictured Christianity as a thousand times having appeared to be 'on the point of universal destruction, and every time that it has been in this condition, God has raised it up by some extraordinary stroke of his power'. Each seeming defeat prepares the community for a deeper level of understanding. Each apparent victory prepares the community for a deeper level of conflict.

The residual vitality of the church, even in periods in which it seems to have been totally undone, is an amazing story recounted in actual human history, featuring startling recoveries after long periods of malaise and apparent death. The worst periods of martyrdom are characteristically accompanied by the profoundest movements of the witness of the Spirit. The deepest sloughs of demoralization and libertinism are followed repeatedly by such correctives as those of Benedict of Nursia, Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Luther, Calvin, Teresa of Avila, Edwards, Wesley, and Teresa of Lisieux. Up to this present time, the promise has held, even against great odds that the gates of hell have not prevailed against the *ekklesia*.

Our varied audiences (lay, pastoral, and student) are much broader than the highly technical field of academic patristic scholarship. They are not limited to the university scholar concentrating on the study of the history of the transmission of the text or to those with highly focused philological interests in textual morphology or historical critical issues. Though these are crucial issues for specialists, they are not paramount issues in this series.

8. HAVE EVANGELICALS OUTLIVED THE DISSOLUTION OF MODERNITY?

The turning point we celebrate today is that the enduring called out community has in fact outlived the dissolution of modernity. It is a fact. Evangelical spirituality, scholarship, preaching, pastoral care, and institutional life have against all odds already weathered the waning winter of modernity. **P. 307**

We are witnessing an emerging resolve in worldwide Protestant, Catholic and Eastern orthodoxy to renew familiar, classic spiritual disciplines: daily scripture reading, prayer, mutual care of souls, and intensive primary group accountability which lives out of its baptism, and is constantly nurtured by the Eucharist. On the same recovery list is the special focus of these presentations: apologetics in a world that seems to have forgotten God.

Having been disillusioned by the illusions of modernity, the faithful are now engaged in a low-keyed, quiet determination to return unpretentiously to the spiritual disciplines that have profoundly shaped our history and common life together, and in fact enabled our survival.

In the midst of any cultural death, gracious gifts of providential guidance are being proffered to human imagination, along with precipitous risks. Human folly and sin are being curbed by the limits which God quietly uses in the process of history.

Those made alive by the Spirit, whose lives are hid in Christ, enter the post-modern ethos confidently. Those enlivened by the re-emergent vitality of classic Christian forms of pastoral care, preaching, worship, and spiritual formation are now living and breathing in a refreshing atmosphere, in a fecund, volatile, potentially pivotal period of apostolic opportunity and witness. Possibilities for the deepening of spiritual life which were set aside long ago are at last viable. Such possibilities have been repeatedly disdained by modernity. We need not be driven to despair by the pressures and melancholy which the modern visions of history seem to be thrusting upon us. They offer the witnessing community an unparalleled opportunity.

The faithful who are surviving modernity are each year less and less intimidated by its supposed potency. Many pilgrims in evangelical spirituality have already doubly paid their dues to modernity, and now search for forgotten wisdoms long ruled out by the narrowly fixated dogmas of enlightenment empiricism and idealism.

This does not prevent the faithful from appreciating the technological, economic, political, and social achievements of modernity. This can be done at the same time as recognizing that the ideological underpinnings of modernity now face radical crisis. Modernity lacks the power to regenerate itself intellectually and morally, and impose its genetic imprint on another generation. The gene pool is too thin for the reconception of modernity. That is the main effect of late-modern aspirations. It is impotent.

9. WHY ARE THE EMERGING AUTHENTICALLY POSTMODERN EVANGELICALS CALLED YOUNG FOGEYS?

To all who suffer in despair over decadent modernity I bring joyful greetings on behalf of young classicists within the post-liberal underground who abide patiently in the catacombs of our despairing modern culture. Despair is the least appropriate response of well-grounded culturally-aware believers to these times. Classic Christianity has in fact healthily survived the **P. 308** death of modernity and joyfully flourishes in this spirited after-modern environment.

Against all prognostications, disciplined Christian spirituality is spontaneously flourishing all over post-modernity. I speak of the impassioned commitment of an emerging group of young bornagain, classic Christian cultural renovators who, having analyzed the methods of analysis of modernity, are now applying an evangelical critique to those analyses. Having been disillusioned by the emptiness of those methods of modern inquiry (psychoanalytic, nihilistic, naturalistic, Marxist, and historicist), having turned in horror from their social consequences, they are now turning in earnest to the texts and ideas and liturgies of classical Christianity. They are young in spirit because they are not the least intimidated by modernity.

When I affectionately dubbed them ‘young fogeys’ I intended merely to point ironically to their youthful, impassioned vitality amid modern disillusionments and their energetic determination to ground themselves scripturally and classically.

They are young because they have not been made old by modernity’s skewed dreams. They are young because they are enlivened by the Holy Spirit. They are fogeys only in the comic sense of being freed to laugh heartily along with ancient wisdoms, especially with patristic forms of exegesis. They are sharply distinguished from the ‘old fogeys’ who remain ideologically bogged in liberal pietism. These young believers are wrongly imagined to be outdated fogeys by a hypermodern messianism which fantasize the continuing power of the assumptions of modernity. They are made youthful and energetic precisely by becoming firmly grounded in the apostolic tradition.

So I salute a whole school of emergent classicists who are discovering in the ancient Christian exegeses of the first eight centuries the most brilliant hermeneutics and doctrinal reflection. In the company of Eusebius, Athanasius and Jerome, they have found a surer basis for critiquing modern historicist pretences to hermeneutical superiority.

Any one who has discovered the dialectical joy and vitality of that critique is a young fogey. The young fogeys are grass-rooted, risk-capable, street-smart, populist, pragmatic renovators of the apostolic tradition. They are mostly recent graduates of celebrated universities, yet tough-minded critics of the ideological tilt of those universities. They understand that the surest form of cultural renovation begins one by one with personal religious conversion, the turning of the heart away from arrogance and folly and toward faith in God. They are the newest work of the Holy Spirit.

The emerging young classical Christians are astute critics of my generation’s modern assumption that so blithely assumed that newer is better, older is worse. As I behold this spiralling emergent generation of young classic Christian women and men, I find myself entering into a kind of resistance movement in relation to my own generation of moral relativists who have to such a large extent botched up our society. [p. 309](#) These young believers know that time is on their side, and so far as time goes. God has plenty of it.

10. WHY IS PALEO-ORTHODOXY SO CROSS-CULTURALLY AGILE?

The most salient feature of orthodoxy is not its rigidity but its flexibility centred in life in the Lord, its willingness to enter freely into this and that culture on behalf of its all-embracing redemptive mission. Apostolicity does not imply a rigid lack of adaptability to emergent culture formations. The glory of the apostolic tradition is precisely its readiness to reach out, meet, confront, and dialogue with different cultures, to become all things to all on behalf of Christ ([1 Cor. 9:19–22](#); Luther *LW* 27{202}). The Holy Spirit speaks all languages. Paleo-orthodoxy has not survived twenty centuries by being unresourceful or unable to make clever responses. Rather it is freed to variable cultural responsiveness by being centred in the eternal Word—the Incarnate and risen Lord. The living body of Christ

lives by penetrating and embracing each new culture and language and symbol system as God's special providential gift.

Because cultures and languages are constantly changing, and because the apostolic testimony must be attested in ever-new languages, it is a necessary feature of the apostolic tradition that it both guard the original testimony and also make it understandable in emergent formations. To fail at either is to default on the apostolic mission. Far from implying unbending immobility, apostolicity requires constant adaptation of the primitive apostolic testimony to new historical challenges and languages, yet without altering or diluting the primitive witness.

11. CAN WE RETRIEVE THE CANON?

Contemporary witnesses are called to make every thought captive to Christ, to appraise every argument or explanation by its correspondence with the received testimony of the apostles. The working premise is that the Holy Spirit would not allow a truly debilitating or defective testimony to be transmitted permanently to the church. Like music the words of the apostles are savoured repeatedly by the remembering *ekklesia*, wrote John Chrysostom.

It is not we who creatively decide what is apostolic but the apostles. The contemporary apostate exists only because it had decided that the testimony of the apostles is true, and will always remain trustworthy. If the apostles' testimony is fundamentally flawed or defective, there is no way the church can begin to learn the truth, for the truth about God's own coming is attested only by original eyewitnesses, and these are called apostles.

Surely the Holy Spirit would not leave such an important matter as the intergenerational transmission of the truth to the jaded imagination of tired radicals speculating about form-criticism. The academic cartel of selected guild scholars who sat for decades on the Dead Sea Scrolls has only recently been broken up. Now it is time to say to the guild scholars who pretend to serve a guardianship [p. 310](#) function with the New Testament text: Give us back our canon.

There is nothing to fear from solid historical inquiry into the tradition of transmission of apostolic testimony. There is only the task of improving historical inquiry and bringing it ever closer to the facts of the incarnate, risen Lord and his body the church.

12. WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO CHOOSE TO BE LIBERATED FROM CLASSIC CHRISTIANITY?

The liberated form of ecclesial imagination that has attached itself to modernity is expiring as modernity expires. The church that weds itself to modernity is already a widow within post-modernity. Those who view themselves as most liberated think of themselves as most freed from traditional constraints of all sorts, all past oppressions, all old ideas. Yet they are often unaware of their own continuing debt to pre-modern wisdoms.

The fantasy of liberation is not a metaphor applied externally to accommodators from outside their own self-understanding, but a term they insist on applying to themselves. By liberated they usually imply: doctrinally imaginative, liturgically experimental, disciplinarily non-judgmental, politically correct, multi-culturally tolerant, morally broad-minded, ethically situationist, and above all, sexually lenient, permissive, uninhibited. I am not speaking merely of liberation theology in the best sense as argued by Gustavo Guterrez or Jürgen Moltmann or Theodore Runyon, but rather an engulfing attitude that we have been liberated from our classic Christian past, from the

patriarchalism of Christian Scriptures, from benighted Jewish and Christian traditions. As a former full-time liberator, I know from experience how mesmerizing this enchantment can be.

When the liberated have virtually no immune system against heresy, no defence whatever against perfidious teaching, no criteria for testing out the legitimacy of counterfeit theological currency, it is time for feet-on-the-ground laity to enter the arena of bureaucratic church reform, and reinvent church governance, polity, and theological education. Laity are beginning to grasp that they have a decisive interest in the apostolicity of the ministries they are asked to trust.

It is now clear that a worldview is ebbing, perhaps not yet wholly extinct, but lacking all vitality, and awaiting only the lingering death process of these failed ideologies: autonomous individualism, narcissistic hedonism, reductive naturalism, and absolute moral relativism. Others may call that world something other than terminal modernity, but I have no better way of naming it. What is happening amid this historical situation is a joyous return to the sacred texts of Christian Scripture and the consensual exegetical guides of the formative period of its canonization and interpretation. Young fogeys, the mod-surviving paleo-orthodox, are those who, having entered in good faith into the disciplines of the modern university, and having become disillusioned with its illusions, are again studying the texts of the ancient Christian [p. 311](#) tradition which point to the word of God revealed in history as attested by prophetic and apostolic witnesses whose testimonies have become perennial authoritative scripture for this worldwide, multicultural, multigenerational remembering and celebrating community.

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Mañana: Discerning the Spirit in Latin America

Samuel Escobar

DISCERNING THE SPIRIT

The end of the century finds Latin American societies in the throes of yet another painful transition. Gone are the dreams of revolutions that were going to engender social utopias. The libertarian rhetoric of liberation theologies has become empty. Instead of lawyers and *literati*, pragmatic economists and engineers now lead these countries through the hard road of accommodation for survival within the strictures of global Market Economies in a unipolar world. Military dictatorships and four digit inflation are gone, and many state enterprises have been privatized, but there is more unemployment, the cities look more crowded and there are more children begging in the streets. In some countries the ideological terror of the guerrillas and the armed forces has been replaced

by a daily hyperdose of American TV violence via satellite, and the actual violence of drug traffickers and common criminals.

Against this background of social and political transformation there is an explosion of religious activity that has taken social scientists, Christian leaders and theologians by surprise. Part of the picture is determined by the long encounter between Iberian Catholicism and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, a mutual challenge to renewal and relevance that developed during this century. When in almost every city you find old theatres converted into Evangelical worship places, and when Catholic priests from Spain or the United States imitate the open air preaching techniques or the healing services of Pentecostal pastors, you know that something new is taking place. Another part of the picture however is the coming of a wider religious pluralism—academic foundations sponsor the revival of pre-Hispanic witchcraft and both Catholics and Evangelicals have to compete with Afro-Brazilian Spiritists and New Age militants to get air time on TV. Thus theological categories developed by Liberation theologies and Evangelical missiologies are quickly becoming obsolete and outdated for those who are searching for pastoral discernment in order to understand what is going on. p. 313

I think theologians in Latin America today find themselves perplexed and full of questions like John the Baptist in prison: history was not happening the way he expected, but Jesus' answer to his question was a simple call to consider the facts: 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk ... and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me; ([Mt. 11:4-6](#)). Today, theologians are also invited to look at the facts of an emerging 'Third Church'¹—the emerging church of the poor, or oral theology, narrative preaching, dreams and visions, signs and wonders and transformative spiritual power which at given points does far more for the poor than the elaborate social agendas of traditional denominations. Perhaps in North and South the time has come for theologians to do at a global scale what Richard Mouw calls 'Consulting the faithful', i.e. intellectuals learning from popular religion.²

Latin American Evangelical theology developed in the '70s and '80s following a two pronged theological approach³—a *critical task*, including an ongoing debate with the two predominant interlocutors: Liberation theologies on the left and Church Growth missiology on the right; and a *constructive task* of developing a theology of mission that would express the dynamic reality and the missionary thrust of Evangelical churches in Latin America. The aim was to provide a solid biblical basis for new patterns of evangelism and discipleship. The frame for this theological reflection was the historical development of churches that enjoyed the heritage of a Bible-centred form of presence and mission, committed to spiritual and social transformation. This theology was developed by people who were all engaged in active evangelistic, teaching and pastoral tasks in Latin America or the Hispanic world of the USA. To the degree that Evangelical theology remained close to the life of these growing churches it took a unique missiological and holistic thrust, dealing with both poverty and justice as well as evangelization.

¹ The expression was coined by missiologist Walbert Bülman to describe the new global church, contrasting it with the dominant Eastern Church of the first thousand years of our era and the dominant Western Church of the millennium now coming to an end.

² Richard Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

³ See my chapter 'The Search for a Missiological Christology in Latin America' in William A. Dymess, Ed., *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), pp. 199–227.

In this phase the thrust of theological reflection was Christological, whose point of entrance was missiology. For both Liberation and Evangelical theologies, the basic question was 'What is the mission of the church in Latin America today?' The existence of the church was a 'given', and all questions about God, human beings, history and Jesus Christ were posed from the ground of this initial reality about which there is no doubt. In their theological reflection, however, Evangelicals saw the existence of their churches as a result of the proclamation of God's Word from Scripture. p. 314 Catholics who have been here longer insisted upon the precedence of the church through whom the Word of Scripture has been given.

At this point, however, five years before the beginning of a new century, the question has taken a new turn. The question is still missiological but the setting has changed. The frame of liberation discourse was the fact that officially the Roman Catholic Church had made an 'option for the poor', avowedly placing herself besides the masses and away from the dominant elites. That was a challenge not only for Catholics but also for Protestants of every kind. But what has become evident in the '90s is that the poor masses in Latin America are opting for the popular Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which have been growing at a significant pace and becoming more visible actors in society.⁴

Posing it in its simplest form, the theological question becomes a search for discernment: 'Are these new facts the work of the Holy Spirit?' The question can be expressed in a threefold manner. First, is the emergence of these new forms of popular Protestantism a sign of God's Spirit moving within the social realities of our times? Is this the new wine of the Spirit reviving his church from below? This would be the pneumatological question. Second, are the new structures of mission, new forms of worship and new ways of communication typical of this popular Protestantism, the new wineskins that the Spirit will use in the century to come? This would be the ecclesiological question. Third, is this religious revival going to bring transformation so that the evil forces that are disintegrating post-modern societies will be controlled and human life preserved? This is the eschatological question.

THE PNEUMATOLOGICAL QUESTION

While discussions about issues such as sanctification, the need for a second experience, glossolalia, the place of healing and miracles, were central to the daily ministry of those who were the main actors in the Pentecostal movement and its precursors, it is only in the second half of this twentieth century that theologians have started to deal seriously with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and Christian mission

One important line of reflection came from missiologists. In fact all through this century, the theology of mission has been pursuing the pneumatological. But it was the amazing growth of the Pentecostal movement, that was missionary from its inception that eventually forced the question into the corridors and debates of the academic world, and

⁴ In this essay I will be referring to 'Evangelical' and 'Pentecostal' churches that have been growing especially among the poor urban masses, and I will use the terms interchangeably. A better way of describing them is 'popular Protestantism'. In some cases I will refer specifically to Pentecostals.

the Pentecostal movement in itself [p. 315](#) became a vast field for research and experimentation.⁵

Evangelical theology in Latin America has not yet explored in a systematic way the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in relation to the existence and mission of the Protestant churches there. I ask myself, why it is that as Evangelical theologians in Latin America we did not place the Holy Spirit higher in our agenda? Could it be that Evangelical dialogue at a global scale imposed a 'modern' agenda on us, in which the role of the Holy Spirit is mainly to help us to arrive at correct propositional truth? The only references to the Holy Spirit in the 'Declaration of Cochabamba', the foundational document of the LATF in 1970, are references to the role of the Spirit in illuminating the Word in order to help us interpret Scripture. That is very 'Evangelical' indeed. However, we have not even one sentence about the Spirit empowering his church for mission and mobilizing all church members for a true priesthood of all believers.⁶ In other words, there is no reflection about that living dimension of our own reality. While the Holy Spirit was driving the rank and file of popular Protestant churches to mission so that they grew in a spectacular way, Evangelical theologians were unaware of the importance of reflection on their own practice as a way of doing theology.

Ironically, in recent times Catholic theologians may have come to our rescue. In a book about the Holy Spirit, Belgian priest José Comblin who has worked for several years in Brazil describes the renewal experiences that have been taking place in the Catholic Base Communities and in the Pentecostal churches. He refers not only to what we call charismatic gifts, but to the sense of freedom that simple men and women experience when they can speak the words of Scripture, praise God aloud in a meeting, face adversity and enemies with a new sense of dignity. He writes, 'People feel themselves taken hold of by new strength that makes them do things they had never thought of doing. Individuals and communities that had been downhearted, lacking in dynamism, resigned to the endless struggle for survival, discover themselves to be protagonists of a history far greater than themselves. Most members of a community would not know how to say that they are experiencing the Spirit; they do not know what names to give to what they experience. But those who do know the names can confirm the reality of the phenomenon.'⁷

It is understandable that a Catholic theologian may attribute the emergence of Base Communities to the work of the Holy Spirit. But for him to include the emergence of popular Protestant churches as part [p. 316](#) of the work of the Holy Spirit today is a significant step. The question however is whether Evangelical theologians are as open as Comblin to see the Holy Spirit at work in this emergence of popular forms of Christianity in Latin America.

The explicit teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of [John 14–16](#) gives us a Christological key to discern the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. If the truth about Jesus Christ comes to be understood by people so that they come to the Father through him, and if the character of Jesus Christ is reflected in their lives, there we can discern the presence of the Spirit. Here we are at the core of the Christian identity and we have a good foundation, a common ground which is a cornerstone. This is especially important in our century,

⁵ Murray Dempster, Byron D. Klaus and Douglas Petersen, Eds, *Called and Empowered, Global Mission in Pentecostal Perspective* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991).

⁶ More attention should be paid at this point to the missiological reflection of Kenneth Strachan and the 'Evangelism in Depth' movement. See his book *The Inescapable Calling* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

⁷ José Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis); p. 20.

when the Christian church has become global and contextual in an astonishing variety of forms.

Some corrections to our perspectives come when we start to develop this principle. Coming from his Pentecostal background, Argentinian Norberto Saracco has pointed out the need to use the categories of the kingdom of God, in order to understand the missionary model of Jesus Christ. The Gospels make it very clear that Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, engaged in a ministry that from the start faced opposition. The source of conflict was the fact that Jesus' ministry touched all aspects of life. The material and spiritual needs of people were not seen as mutually exclusive. The evil spirits that oppressed people resisted Jesus, but resistance came also from those persons or social groups which had political or religious power and were oppressing the people. Today's mission in Latin America confronts also the powers of darkness in the form of spiritual as well as economic and social oppression, and needs the same empowering that made possible the mission of Jesus.

The task of the theologian is to recover a biblical dimension of the gospel as the gospel of the kingdom and to learn to see how the Holy Spirit today transforms persons in all the dimensions of their humanity.

Recovering faith in post-modern societies

In Latin American societies, the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern coexist within the confines of the same city. The theological task of understanding, expressing and communicating the Christian faith within this kind of environment is a continuing call to renewal, creativity and boldness. Theology must be driven by a missiological thrust and a disposition to take seriously the frontiers that the church is constantly crossing.

Evangelical theology has been an effort to keep the missiological thrust and the faithfulness to revealed truth. Our emphasis has not been on a continuity expressed by an earthly hierarchical institution but on a continuity made possible by God's Word revealed to human beings. However, in the contemporary situation I think we need to pay heed to Emil Brunner who wrote, 'It is not merely a question of the continuity of the word—the maintenance of the original doctrine—but [p. 317](#) also of the continuity of a life; that is life flowing from the Holy Ghost. The fellowship of Jesus lives under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; that is the secret of its life, of its communion and of its power.'⁸

While theologians seem to be at home in handling words from the Word and in formulating precise orthodox propositions about the content of the faith, they do not know exactly how to handle the reality of the Holy Spirit at work in the church and in the world. The times call for a new openness to the Spirit.

A new openness to the Holy Spirit

Latin American Evangelicals have considered themselves the inheritors of Luther, Calvin or the Anabaptists. But the dynamism of missionary Protestantism came from the renewal movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And now we realize that we have not been listening to these our fathers in the faith. The readiness of men like Wesley or Zinzendorf to abandon old church structures, and their creativity in developing new structures for mission was made possible because they were open to the movements of the Spirit. An attitude of openness to the Spirit is what Brazilian missiologist Valdir Steuernagel calls for in his book about *Mission obedience and historical practice: the search*

⁸ Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); p. 47.

*for models.*⁹ He observes, 'Mission understood in pneumatological language is one act with two steps. It is first to perceive the blow of the Spirit and the direction from which it comes. And then it is to run in the same direction towards which the Spirit is blowing.'¹⁰

The discernment of the wind from the Spirit requires an open attitude and sensitivity to acknowledge that behind facts that appear as something new and unusual, the strength and vigour of the Spirit may be at work. The act of obedience demands creativity in order to shape new structures that will be adequate instruments for missionary action in a particular historical moment.

Even in the Pauline missionary practice we find the same discernible pattern. Paul's Christology is the development of pastoral, doctrinal and ethical teaching that stems from the fact of Christ. Paul elaborates his Christology as he responds to the needs and the questions of churches which were born from the Spirit and had the signs of new life, but had not yet articulated their belief in a meaningful way. What we have in the world today are churches in which people may repeat every week the minutiae of a Christological creed but they do not have the new life in Christ that the Spirit begets. On the other hand we have growing churches where there are the signs of the power of the Spirit at work but where a basic theological p. 318 task is necessary, along the lines of what Paul did in his ministry. The approach must be the one that Gordon Fee sets for himself in his massive study about the Holy Spirit in Paul: 'Not only has the coming of Christ changed everything for Paul, so too has the coming of the Spirit. In dealing with the Spirit, we are dealing with none other than the *personal presence of God* himself.'¹¹

As we look back to historical models and as we also look around us to what is taking place in churches around the world, we realize the need to keep in mind the uniqueness of our time and the larger picture of the history of the church.

With that kind of perspective Andrew Walls keeps reminding us that the expressions of Christianity of the southern hemisphere (Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and to some degree Latin America) are becoming the dominant forms of the faith, a fact that will have significant consequences, as missiologist Lesslie Newbigin has observed. Pointing to some deadlocks in the ecumenical conversation of the '50s between Catholics and Protestants he wondered if 'the way forward may be found in a new understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. But of course that illumination which is needed will never come as a result of purely academic theological study. May it not be that the great Churches of the Catholic and the Protestant traditions will have to be humble enough to receive it in fellowship with their brethren in the various groups of the Pentecostal type with whom at present they have scarcely any fellowship at all?'¹²

This is the kind of dialogue that has been taking place recently in the doing of theology in Latin America, but it still has a long way to go.

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL QUESTION

In his missiological reflection, the late Orlando Costas summarized well the variety of theological concerns that Evangelical theologizing faced and developed after Lausanne

⁹ Valdir R. Stuernage, *Obediencia missionária e prática histórica. Em busca de modelos* (Sao Paulo: ABU Editora, 1993).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 92.

¹¹ Gordon D Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: the Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994); pp. 6 and 9.

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of Faith* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 122.

1974. He tried to articulate a vision of what he called 'the integrity of mission' through an approach that was both critical and constructive. In his posthumous book *Liberating News* he posed the need for a contextual evangelistic practice, stating, 'we have been arguing not so much for a new type of evangelization as for a new way of understanding and practising contextual evangelization. This implies a socio-historical approach to the biblical roots of evangelization, a communal theological ground and an ecclesial vision informed by the theological and social base of the church.'¹³

The missiological thrust of some recent lines of New Testament p. 319 scholarship is demonstrating the relevance of the agenda described here by Costas, and the deepening of our understanding of the early church as a result of what he calls a socio-historical approach to our biblical roots.¹⁴ Anthropological and socio-logical research about the Mediterranean basin in the first century has illuminated the context of the New Testament so that we perceive better the nature, means and effects of mission in its apostolic stage, the worldviews of the main actors in that drama, the way in which the fact of Christ impacted human history at that point.¹⁵ In a similar way, the social sciences have helped to provide a better understanding of the present sociohistorical context in Latin America.

Ecclesiology and social analysis

One way in which the social sciences contribute to the work of the theologian is by providing a better understanding of the church as a social group and of the functioning of the structures of the church. The data gathered by social scientists about the way in which churches function as communities becomes an eye-opener for the theologian.

In the case of Latin America the growth of the popular Protestant churches has made them the object of a sometimes hostile scrutiny from social scientists. Earlier work from sociologists about popular Protestant churches showed some characteristics that are very important from the ecclesiological perspective, especially how the participation of the people was facilitated and through this there developed a liberating experience which enabled simple men and women to practise the priesthood of all believers.

One of the earliest sociological analyses of Pentecostals in Brazil and Chile was the work of Emilio Willems.¹⁶ He stressed the participative nature of Pentecostal liturgy and congregational life, for which literacy or education were not necessary but only a disposition to be touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. His analysis pointed to the significance of the *tomada do Espiritu* or 'seizure by the Spirit' that 'puts a seal of divine approval on the individual who can now be elected or appointed to any office'.¹⁷ The seizure as a form of legitimation had to be validated also by energetic and successful proselytism. p. 320

¹³ Orlando Costas, *Liberating News* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); p. 148.

¹⁴ Here I am thinking of the work pioneered by E.A. Judge in his book *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the New Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960); and also of the work of A.J. Malherbe, Wayne Meeks and Gerd Theissen.

¹⁵ An extensive bibliography on this point is Jean Duhaime, 'Early Christianity and the Social Sciences: A Bibliography' *Social Compass* 39 (2), (1992); pp. 275–290. In relation to the missiological use of this material see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991); Chapter 1.

¹⁶ E. Willems, *Followers of the New Faith: Culture Change and the Rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967; 'Protestantism and Cultural Change in Brazil and Chile' in W.V. D'Antonio and F.B. Pike, Eds., *Religion, Revolution and Reform* (New York: Praeger, 1964); pp. 93–108.

¹⁷ Willems, *Followers ...*; p. 106–107.

It became evident that this experience had an integrative effect, allowing thousands of persons from the lower social classes to become part of an organized group in which they could enter in community, contribute what they had to offer and receive affirmation, comfort and a sense of belonging. The seizure experience had also an egalitarian effect, because participation in the community did not require the symbols of status like money, social rank, education or even verbal articulateness. What started at the level of liturgical participation could also be extended to the level of decision-making processes in the community.,

The work of Karl Wilhelm Westmeier¹⁸ a missionary and theologian in Colombia and Puerto Rico is an example of how sociological data such as this provides the basis for missiological understanding and criteria.

Ecclesiology and political ethics

The numerical growth of Pentecostals fostered upward mobility and created conditions that brought the political question to the foreground of sociological observation and theological reflection. Willems' analysis demonstrated the sociological potential of conversion to Pentecostalism that included an emphasis on some marks of character as indication of 'the change of Life'. As Westmeier develops the point, this important component of the Pentecostal message was considered an evidence of the redeeming power of Christ. As in the case of evangelical protestants, Pentecostals presented the convert with specific prohibitions against the use of alcohol and tobacco. But what was especially significant in the Pentecostal practice was that the prohibitions were accompanied by the strong emphasis on an emotional experience of conversion, a seizure from God's power, that in some cases was the key point of breaking away from the old habits like alcoholism, prevalent among the popular classes of the urban world.

In the Pentecostal experience the ascetic lifestyle included in conversion was also accompanied by a celebrative form of worship and communal life that was a great aid to endurance among the converted. This change of lifestyle had also economic and social consequences in the improvement of housing conditions and eating habits. Savings were generated and sometimes matched with a newly discovered ability for entrepreneurship that brought upward mobility, 'The economic significance of Protestant asceticism lies in the fact that it frees part of one's income for the acquisition of things that symbolize a higher level of living.'¹⁹

Prompted into political action by numerical growth and upward mobility, Evangelicals had to pay attention to the theological task of p. 321 reflecting about politics. During the '70s such evangelical reflection was set within the theological frame of the kingdom of God.²⁰ Later on, a consultation in 1983 tackled the issue of political power,²¹ and Latin American Evangelicals involved in the political arena of their countries brought a new

¹⁸ Karl Wilhelm Westmeier, *Reconciling Heaven and Earth. The Transcendental Enthusiasm and Growth of an Urban Protestant Community, Bogotá, Colombia* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1986).

¹⁹ Willems, 'Protestantism and cultural change ...', p. 251.

²⁰ A starting point was C. René Padilla, Ed., *El Reino de Dios y América Latina* (El Paso: CBP, 1975).

²¹ See Pablo Deiros, Ed., *Los evangélicos y el poder político* (Grand Rapids-Buenos Aires: Eerdmans-Nueva Creación, 1986).

agenda to theological reflection.²² In the consultation to celebrate 20 years of the LATF two theological themes about which there was intentional reflection were 'justice' and 'power'. In the series of consultations that preceded this celebration other questions studied were 'poverty' and 'terrorism'. These are not theoretical questions for Latin American Evangelicals. Those writing papers were many times reflecting about their own experiences as politicians, lawyers working in human rights issues, pastors in areas where insurgency and counter-insurgency wars were decimating the population, or denominational leaders who had to provide orientation during presidential elections in which the vote of Evangelicals was decisive.²³

The approach to the issues of justice and power was basically Christological in the work of Padilla, which developed from the eschatological dimension of his Christology. This was operative in his critical evaluation of culture, and the understanding of the forces hostile to the kingdom of God that presently enslave human beings and tend to undermine the church's identity and distort her mission. There is an Antichrist at work in the world, that has to be named and unmasked at the same time as Jesus Christ is proclaimed as Lord.²⁴

The Christological key is also very important when we look inside the structures of the churches. If the final outcome of their ministry is lives shaped by the example of Jesus Christ and by growth in demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit we have in them valuable missiological lessons. In order to refine our Christological evaluation socio-historical analysis provides help in understanding what is really taking place in the life inside these popular churches, and in their projection outside to the societies of which they are a part.

In the countries where the growth of popular Protestantism has been more visible sociological analysis has been able to follow up the evolution of these churches. We have now valuable studies covering several decades in Chile and Brazil. In recent years Evangelical theologians have developed a more sophisticated socio-theological research in [p. 322](#) an effort to probe into the social life of the churches and their structures, relating facts to beliefs.²⁵

Paul Freston from Brazil is the scholar who has conducted the most exhaustive and systematic scrutiny of Brazilian Pentecostalism and its expressions in relation to politics.²⁶ Summarizing data from a variety of sources he concludes that 'the new evangelical political participants in Brazil do not have a project; they only feel, and perhaps justifiably, that the future belongs to them.'²⁷ This is in open contrast with the beginning of this century in which Protestantism presented itself as the carrier of modernization.

²² An account and evaluation of this process in my articles in the special issue of *Boletín Teológico*, Nos.42/43, 1991. More recent events are presented in C. René Padilla, 'Latin American Evangelicals Enter the Public Square' *Transformation* Vol. 9, No.3, (1992).

²³ See samples of testimonies and reflection in an already mentioned issue of *Transformation* Vol. 9, No.3, (Jul-Set 1992).

²⁴ See especially *Mission Between the Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

²⁵ For Chile, see Humberto Lagos Schuffeneger, *Crisis de la esperanza* (Santiago de Chile: Presor-Lar, 1988); see also Westmeier above.

²⁶ His doctoral dissertation *Protestantes e politica no Brasil: da Constituinte ao Impeachment* (Universidade de Campinas, 1993); soon to be published by Editora Sumaré, Sao Paulo) was the basis for his book *Evangélicos na politica brasileira; História ambigua e desafio ético* Curitiba: (Encontro Editora, 1994).

²⁷ 'In Search of an Evangelical Political Project for Brazil: a Pentecostal "Showvention"' *Transformation* Vol. 9, No.3; p. 30.

However, an analysis of the activities of current Pentecostal politicians suggests that they seem to be lending to the worst kind of political conservatism 'the phenomenal contribution of (their) cultural and rhetorical resources, and enviable human and organizational base resources'.²⁸ Moreover, they have fallen into corrupt political practices that non-Evangelicals have been eager to criticize.

What Freston describes as the lack of a project to guide the political action of Pentecostals is rooted in an extremely individualistic understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world. Hence, he stresses the need of Evangelicals in Brazil to work seriously in ethical issues that are challenging them at this point.

He uses the three temptations that the devil presents to Jesus as a key to understand the temptations faced now by the large Pentecostal churches in Brazil. They are permanent temptations for the church in every age. The temptation to possess the kingdoms of the world and their splendour is the temptation of triumphalism, the search for visibility. The temptation to transform stones into bread is the temptation posed by Prosperity Theology, a hedonistic gospel. And the temptation to throw himself from the top of the temple is the temptation of the so-called 'Spiritual Warfare' to impress the world by a demonstration of power. These temptations militate against the urgent ethical renewal that the popular churches in Brazil need.²⁹ They must be faced in the name of Jesus and with the power of the Spirit.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL QUESTION

One of the most important aspects of the Christian situation in Latin America is the change in the perception of history now that the **P. 323** marxist utopia has come to an end, which had a powerful influence during this second half of our century. In fact one of the distinctive notes of Liberation Theologies was their use of marxist categories for social analysis, historical criticism and the formulation of a political project.³⁰ Not enough has been said about how much of the liberation discourse was based on the assumption or hope that world history was moving towards socialism. The party line for catholic and ecumenical theologians was expressed succinctly by a Lutheran theologian from Argentina: 'At this point of historical circumstances the fundamental contradiction which confronts us involves North American imperialism and its local accomplices.'³¹ The solution to the problem was defined not so much in terms of a viable proposal for a different kind of society, but through the negative way of dialectics, 'The path toward the liberation of Latin America will not lead through the capitalistic system, but will be anti-capitalistic and anti-imperialistic.'³²

In those days when Russia, China, Cuba and later on Nicaragua were depicted as good models of alternative societies, the political programme of 'liberation' was usually

²⁸ *Ibid.*; p. 29;

²⁹ Freston, *Evangélicos na Política ...* p. 138–140.

³⁰ For a self-critical account from a liberationist perspective see Arthur F. McGovern, SJ, 'Dependency Theory, Marxist Analysis and Liberation Theology', in Marc H. Ellis and Otto Maduro, Eds., *Expanding the View, Gustavo Gutiérrez and the Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

³¹ Mario Yutzis, 'The Revolutionary Process and Latin American Christianity', *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 22, No.1, (1970); p. 19.

³² *Ibid.*

described in terms of the search for some kind of 'socialist' project.³³ However everything, from Sunday School material to curriculum in theological schools, from liturgical practices to missionary methods came to be evaluated from this anticapitalist pro-socialist perspective.³⁴ The history of the church was therefore reinterpreted from the perspective of that general movement of history and a certain 'political correctness' criterium was developed in order to evaluate churches and religious movements.

Such an approach to the churches of the poor by sociologists and theologians did not allow them to perceive the historical significance of the multiplication of these churches around the world, and its social impact. This is better perceived now that observers and scholars have had to come to terms with the fact that in spite of all good theory and good intentions many actions in favour of the poor were tainted by a paternalistic approach. Social and political conscientization took the form of a struggle *for* the poor, p. 324 trying to create a more just society *for* them rather than *with* them. Historical churches connected to world communities and denominational families had access to funds, foreign press and even diplomatic ties that were used in an effort to help the victims of poverty or state terrorism. Sacrificial inculturation among the poor was many times the source of these efforts, but they failed in mobilizing the poor themselves. By contrast, the popular Protestant churches are popular movements in themselves. Their pastors and leaders do not have to identify with the poor, *they are the poor*. They do not have a social agenda but an intense spiritual agenda and it is through that agenda that they have been able to have a social impact.

The dynamic of this movement of the poor was better perceived by missiologists and that perception has been refined more recently. Costas provided a theological key when he focused on the significance of mission as coming from the 'periphery', from the marginalized people. He considers carefully the Galilean base of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Mark and concludes that the deliberate choice of Galilee is a key 'not only to understanding Mark but also to recovering and interpreting Jesus' evangelistic legacy'.³⁵ In Costas' use the term 'periphery' means not only the region of Galilee that was on the fringes of the Palestinian Jewish world, but also the kind of people who were the first disciples, not only from the respectable classes of Israel but especially from the outsiders and the marginals. Thus Mark's emphasis provides a clue of universal value when we look at evangelization and the Christian mission.

'If evangelization starts on the periphery of society, if it works from the bottom up, the good news of God's kingdom is vividly demonstrated and credibly announced as a message of liberating love, justice and peace. When the Gospel makes "somebody" out of "nobodies" in society, when it restores the self-worth of the marginalized, when it enables the oppressed to have a reason for hope, when it empowers the poor to struggle and suffer for justice and peace, then it is truly good news of a new order of life. When evangelization begins at the centres of power, working from the top down, its content usually ends up

³³ There was a more sophisticated development beyond the simplistic categories of the '70s. José Miguez Bonino offers a discussion of this socialist historical project using key ideas from Gustavo Gutiérrez as well as his own. See *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

³⁴ I have analyzed the influence of the marxist utopia on historical and theological discourse in my book *La fe evangélica y las teologías de la liberación* (El Paso: CBP, 1987), and in *Liberation Themes in Reformational Perspective*.

³⁵ Costas, *Liberating News*; p. 49.

being an easy and cheap accommodation of the vested interests of the mighty and wealthy.’³⁶

We may well place the growth of popular Protestantism in Latin America within the larger frame of the shift of Christianity to the south, ‘the south’ meaning in this case not only Asia, Africa and Latin America, but also the enclaves of poverty and marginalization in the rich nations of Europe and North America, all places in which churches are growing. That ‘periphery’ is going to be the base for mission in the coming century and we have not yet explored all the theological significance of this possibility. At the end of the imperial age of mission in p. 325 which the gospel was presented from above by Spanish conquistadores or followed too closely the European colonial pattern, the Third Church is carrying on mission from below—Gipsies in Spain, Filipino maids in the Muslim countries, illegal immigrants in the United States, African university students in Europe. Here also the truth about the Holy Spirit offers us fertile territory for theological exploration.

The spirituality of Mañana

The way in which eschatology relates to a renewed biblical understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit from the perspective of the emerging churches of the poor has been forcefully presented by Justo L. González in his beautiful book *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. In his chapter about ‘Life in the Spirit’ he addresses the deeply felt malaise that affects many mainline Protestant denominations in North America, and discards the easy prescriptions that look for structural matters and constitutional revisions as a solution. For him ‘The problem really has to do with the meaning of the Gospel and how we apply it, not only in our individual lives but also in the communal and structural life of the church’, and consequently ‘the solution to our present malaise will not be found until we deal with issues of spirituality and come to a spirituality that is both deeply grounded in Scripture and radically relevant to today’s world.’³⁷

In order to guide us through the understanding of biblical spirituality González insists on a note that permeates his book as he deals with Creation and Christology. He reminds us of the way in which Christian thinking became influenced by Hellenistic religiosity and adopted its contrast between matter and spirit. That distinction, however, is not central to the biblical understanding of reality and should not be at the centre of our understanding of spirituality.

‘The basis for Christian spirituality is not “the spiritual” in the sense of the non-material. The basis for Christian spirituality is the Spirit—the Holy Spirit of God. Therefore in biblical parlance one is “spiritual” not because one is primarily concerned with “spiritual” things in contrast to the “material” but because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. A “spiritual person” is not one who flexes and develops his or her spirit, as an athlete flexes and develops muscles, but one in whom the Spirit of the Lord dwells.’³⁸

As we look at the totality of Scripture, from creation to consummation, all that God has done, is doing, and will do, is done through the Spirit. There is here a discontinuity because the spirit of the world sees only ‘that which naturally follows from the present order, while the Spirit of God allows us to see “what has been bestowed to us” ([1 Cor. 2:12](#)), the coming Reign, the new order, our inheritance, the promise.’³⁹ p. 326

³⁶ *ibid.* p. 62.

³⁷ *ibid.* p. 157.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁹ *ibid.*; p. 160.

What González finds in the Book of Acts is that ‘part of the function of the Spirit is to allow the believing community to live already, at least partially, in the “not yet” of the Reign’.⁴⁰ ‘On this basis, being “spiritual” means living out of the future we have been promised, precisely because that promise has been sealed and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. What this means is that Christian spirituality that is based not on our own “spiritual” or “soulish” powers but on the presence of the Holy Spirit—is eschatological in nature. It is future-oriented. It is life lived out on an expectation, out of a hope and a goal. And that goal is the coming Reign of God. To have the Spirit is to have a foot up on the stirrup of the eschatological future and to live now as those who expect a new reality, the coming of the Reign of God.’⁴¹

What González proposes is a stance and a theology that can well be described by the Spanish word *Mañana*. This word does not only mean ‘tomorrow’, but it is the radical questioning of today; it is a time unlike today, ‘it is a time of a new reality, not the outcome of today’s disorderly order but the outcome of other factors that bring about a breach with an unbearable today’. Gambling or drugs are the ways in which some poor people try to get into that *mañana*.

‘Then there are those who capture the *mañana* vision of Scripture. The world will not always be as it is. It will not even be an outgrowth of what is. God who created the world in the first place is about to do a new thing—a thing as great and as surprising as that first act of creation. God is already doing this new thing, and we can join in it by the power of the Spirit. *Mañana* is here! True, *mañana* is not yet today, but today can be lived out of the glory and the promise of *mañana*, thanks to the power of the Spirit.’⁴²

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Faith Transforming Context: in Search of a Theology for a Viable Caribbean

Dieumene Noëlliste

INTRODUCTION

Christian faith is a ferment of transformation. What it seeks to achieve first and foremost is the transformation of reality in accordance with God’s ideal for life. Its aim is the removal of what is and its replacement by what ought to be ([2. Cor.5:17](#); [Rev. 21:3–5](#)).

Now the shift from the real to the ideal does not occur by fiat or instantly; rather it involves a process whose completion is eschatological. But the gradualness of faith’s

⁴⁰ *ibid.*; p. 162.

⁴¹ *ibid.*; p. 163.

⁴² *ibid.*; p. 164.

modus operandus must not be mistaken for the postponement of the transformational process, or the uncertainty of its fulfilment (2 Pet. 3:3 ff). Wherever genuine faith is firmly rooted, transformation is under way, however imperceptible it may be to the naked eye. Understood in this way then, faith generates and nurtures hope. Faith is never pessimistic.

But to be transforming, faith must not be muzzled. The faith that transforms is a faith that is communicated in its genuineness, freed from cultural captivity, delivered from ideological enslavement, and is brought to bear on reality with power and incisiveness. Faith has the power to be iconoclastic and creative, but to be so, it must be allowed to be faith.

Faith, however, does not impact reality in a direct and unmediated way. Faith reaches reality *via* theological interpretation. As a link between faith and reality, theology reflects on faith, explains and relates it to reality. The way in which faith affects reality therefore is contingent on the strength of the theological articulation it receives. For example, a theological understanding that restricts faith's province to the realm of the private and the immaterial severely limits its effectiveness. A faith that is kept aloof from reality cannot change it no matter how powerful it may be. By the same token any conceptualization that merges faith with the context in a manner that alters its content, downplays its claims and nullifies its uniqueness, dulls its challenging edge and reduces its potency. When faith is diluted in reality it loses its critical and corrective force. In such cases faith appears weak and ineffective, p. 328 but in reality it is the theology that mediates it that is impotent and not faith itself.¹

Hope lies in expectation of change. Where the possibility of change is removed, despair reigns. If, then, theology is to inspire hope it must do two things. Firstly, it must maintain the integrity of faith. That is, it must be a faithful servant of faith. Secondly, it must engage faith with reality. It must allow faith to confront the context concretely, pointedly and specifically. The theology that facilitates faith's transforming function is perforce contextual. Its task is to articulate the relevance and implications of faith for a particular socio-historical milieu. Its role is to accentuate the facets of faith that address pertinently the concerns of a given context.

To say this is to acknowledge a great difficulty with this assignment. Our task calls for an analysis of the Caribbean reality and the presentation in broad strokes of a theology that might assist in its transformation. The problem is that the Caribbean reality is not homogeneous but complex and multifaceted. Hence no one theology can accomplish this task satisfactorily. All that can be attempted here is to identify some overarching and trans-contextual issues and suggest how theology might bring faith to bear on them. No definiteness is claimed for this effort. It is very much a search.

The issues which will be identified in the course of an analysis of the Caribbean context, will all relate to the overall concern of the Caribbean at this time, namely its viability. The Caribbean faces enormous challenges which have led many to wonder whether it will survive. It will be argued that survival and viability are possible goals and efforts toward these objectives can be enhanced if due consideration is given to certain aspects of the Christian understanding of creation, redemption, stewardship and providence.

I. STRENGTH THROUGH SOLIDARITY

¹ Samuel Escobar, *Le Fe Evangelica Y Las Teologias de la Liberacion* (El Paso, Texas: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1987), p. 24.

The Caribbean region is amazingly diverse and stubbornly intricate. Its history of slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism has left a legacy of heterogeneity that manifests itself at every level of Caribbean life.

Culturally, it is justified to speak at least of five 'Caribbeans'. There is a French, English, Dutch, Spanish and Creole Caribbean. These cultural groupings are delineated linguistically and with the exception of the Creole Caribbean, they relate much more comfortably with their respective extra-regional cultural counterparts than to one another.

Geographically, the long history of domination of the region by foreign powers, and their fight over the Caribbean spoils have resulted in a ridiculously truncated region. One is baffled by the further splintering of what the sea had already sliced off into thin and miniscule portions. Hence islands and islets which should naturally be grouped together by virtue of their geographical proximity are isolated one from the other because politically or culturally they fall p. 329 under the aegis of different outside powers. This atomizing and isolating phenomenon manifests itself even within individual geographical units—large or small.²

Politically, the Caribbean 'represent[s] a unique and challenging experience in the history of mankind'.³ The level of political fragmentation encountered there is unmatched anywhere else. The general political configuration of the region at the moment consists of independent states, associated states, and dependencies.⁴ Naturally, the orientation, interest and perception of these groupings seldom cohere. But even within the political subgroupings, there are several factors that militate against Caribbean cross-fertilization. One thinks of the sea, divergence of cultural and linguistic traditions, size of population, level of economic development, ideological leanings, lack of trust, differing political aspirations, and so on.⁵ One consequence of this history of isolation is a region virtually closed to itself. Its thirty one million inhabitants may be neighbours, but in reality they are by and large strangers.

But in recent years, economic realities both within and outside the region have led to some stirrings towards regional integration. It has dawned on many persons in the region that in this age of large regional economic blocs, the Caribbean with its small mini-states and territories⁶ will be even less viable than it is now unless it comes together and presents a unified and common front to the world. Isolated from each other, and confronted with a growing erosion of support from their traditional allies, many of the

² For example, the island of Hispaniola is divided between French and Creole speaking Haiti, and the Spanish speaking Dominican Republic. The tiny island of St Maarten is split into a French and Dutch speaking side.

³ Franklin Knight and Colin Palmer, 'The Caribbean' in *The Modern Caribbean*, Franklin Knight and Colin Palmer, eds. (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 1.

⁴ Franklin Knight, 'The Societies of the Caribbean Since Independence' in *Democracy In The Caribbean*, Jorge Dominiquez, Robert Pastor and R. Delisle Worrell, eds. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 31.

⁵ Take the dependent territories for example. There is a strong force in Puerto Rico pushing for the independence of the island, but Grand Cayman and Bermuda seem quite content with their status. Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba and the Dominican Republic are all independent nations sharing the same geographical area. But that does not mean closeness of relationship. Haiti and the Dominican Republic have had a history of political conflict, which continues to impact adversely relations between the two countries. Due to the sea and divergent linguistic traditions interaction between Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic is minimal. For ideological reasons, interaction with Cuba is at a low ebb.

⁶ Some of the states and territories have populations of fewer than one hundred people.

region's territories are weak and vulnerable. It has become evident [p.330](#) more than ever that Caribbean cooperation is a necessity.⁷

It need not be said that the current trend toward integration is encouraging. However, it is not pessimistic to say that in light of the prevailing culture of isolation that we have analyzed above, Caribbean unity, however much desired, will probably be a lengthy process which will take us well into the third millennium. Our claim here is that Christian faith can make a unique contribution to the fulfilment of the Caribbean people's aspiration for togetherness.

In stark contrast to the prevailing mood of individualism and the concentration on narrow self-interest, Christian faith espouses a communitarian vision of life. It is a vision which eschews indifference and callousness but instead advocates responsibility for mutual safekeeping. In the Christian perspective, we *are* our brother's keepers.

There are at least two aspects of the faith that speak to this with particular force. The first is the Christian view of creation. In a decisive departure from pagan theology, biblical revelation affirms not only the singleness of God but also his universality. The Christian God is not only not many, he is also not parochial. All falls within his purview. His sovereignty and judgement are all-embracing ([Acts 17:24-28](#); [Isa. 13-27](#)). He formed the earth, adorned it, providentially and gratuitously ordered it for the dwelling of humanity ([Acts 17:26](#); [14:16, 17](#)). The Lord of the earth, he allocates national boundaries ([Deut. 2:5, 9, 16](#); [32:8](#)), determines periods for the rise and fall of nations ([Dan. 2, 7](#)) and sovereignly uses them for the fulfilment of his purpose ([Isa. 19:19-25](#); [45:1ff](#); [Hab. 1:5-11](#)). The earth then is not the personal property of humankind but a common inheritance. At a time of ethnic strife and high nationalistic spirit, the implications of this concept need to be explored, although the scope of this work does not allow for this. Suffice it to say here that as beneficiaries of a common bequest, there must be a bond that binds the inhabitants of the planet—the Caribbean people included.

But the Christian view of God goes deeper. God's exercise of universal sovereignty is grounded in the pervasiveness of his creative activity. The Lord of heaven and earth is the creator of all that exists generally, and humankind particularly. To all he gives life, breath and all things. In him humans move, live and have [p. 331](#) their beings ([Acts 17:25-27](#)). Humankind therefore shares not only a common trust but a common origin as well. All 'descended from one common ancestor'.⁸ Creatively speaking, God is the Father of all ([Eph. 3:14, 15](#)). Now those who share a common kinship, and depend on a common source for their sustenance are usually conscious of their ties and endeavour to maintain them despite obstacles.

The second aspect of the Christian faith which is particularly relevant for the Caribbean search for togetherness is the doctrine of redemption. The unity that lies potentially in creation, redemption has sought to actualize. The purpose of God's saving

⁷ Attempts at forging a Caribbean unity go back to the late fifties when some of the countries that are part of the Caribbean Commonwealth joined forces to form a federation. The effort was shortlived however; by the early '60s the federation was dissolved. In the early years of the '70s, efforts toward integration resumed and led to the formation of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Composed almost exclusively of former British, CARICOM is basically a Commonwealth body, although it has recently approved the membership of a former Dutch colony. Other non-English speaking islands are knocking at the door for membership but unsuccessfully thus far. They are only granted observer status.

Recently at the urging of the West Indian Commission, the Association of Caribbean states has been formed. It comprises all of the Caribbean countries and the adjoining South and Central American nations. See The West Indian Commission, *Time For Action* (Kingston, JA.: The Press-University of the West Indies, 1993).

⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 258.

act is quality living *in community*, not in isolation. Biblical revelation makes it abundantly clear that what God sought to achieve in intervening redemptively into history is the gathering of a *people* unto himself ([1 Pet. 2:9](#)). In the divine purpose, this people is to constitute a well-knit family enjoying filial relationship with God and forming a universal brotherhood among themselves. Both the old and the new covenant are agreed that although peculiar, the redeemed company is not to be an elite and exclusive group. It is to be very much cosmopolitan ([Matt. 28:19ff](#); [Rev. 7:9](#)). Indeed, the divine intention is that the entire human race would be that redeemed people ([John 3:16, 17](#); [1 Tim. 2:3-6](#); [1 John 2:2](#)).

Within the redeemed commonwealth, there is to be a levelling of relationships ([Gal. 3:28](#)). That is why one of the objectives that God sought to accomplish through the cross is the breaking down of barriers that formerly alienated people ([Eph. 2:14-19](#)). Where redemption is experienced, then, there ought to be a transcending of manmade obstacles—a transcending that clears the way for genuine human solidarity.

Solidarity is not an ideal pursued for its own sake and devoid of practical import. The praxis of the people of God throughout history has shown that when people stand together in solidarity they increase their strength and accomplish much even in the face of incredible odds. Thus, partly through unity of purpose and cooperative effort, an almost destitute people freshly delivered from slavery constructed a splendid structure as a symbol of the presence of God in their midst ([Exod. 35-40](#)). Partly through unity of intention and concentrated effort, a band of returning exiles rebuilt the broken walls of Jerusalem in the face of much discouragement, ridicule and open opposition ([Neh. 4, 6, 7](#)). Again, partly through their solidarity, the numerically insignificant and embattled first Christian church withstood intense and sustained hostility, carried out its evangelistic and missionary mandate, and provided for the material and spiritual needs of all within its ranks ([Acts 2:43-47](#); [4:32-35](#)).

These examples are instructive. Within the framework of a relationship characterized by solidarity, the diversity which is now seen as the [p. 332](#) Achilles heel of the Caribbean region may well become its strength.

II COLLECTIVE WELL-BEING THROUGH FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP

The arrival of the Europeans in the Caribbean at the end of the 15th century drastically transformed economic life in the region. Prior to Columbus' visit the Caribbean was looking inwards and economically self-sufficient. The people who originally populated the region moved about from territory to territory and gained their livelihood exclusively from what was produced in the region. Since the 1500s, however, economic activity in the Caribbean has been ordered in a fashion that suits mainly the demands of the outside world. One consequence of this change in orientation has been an economic dependency that has not only undermined the well-being of the region's inhabitants, but now threatens the very viability of the area itself.

'From the very outset the Europeans had defined their Caribbean possessions as places that were meant to satisfy the home demand for tropical staples.'⁹ In line with this policy, they quickly converted the region into 'their primary sphere of tropical colonial exploitation'.¹⁰ Hence already by the early 1500s the Caribbean became Europe's

⁹ Francisco Scarano, 'Labor and Society In The Nineteenth Century' in Franklin Knight and Colin Palmer, *opus cited*, p. 53.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

foremost producer of tropical goods.¹¹ As the 18th century drew to a close, 'the region reached the peak of its development as mercantilist Europe's foremost colonial sphere'.¹² In the 19th century, the Caribbean became economically and geopolitically significant to North America as well.

The second half of the 20th century saw a number of territories gaining their independence from their colonial masters. But even for these newly independent nations the situation has not changed significantly. Many continue to operate servant economies.¹³ And they not only continue to be closely linked to the needs of the outside world, but as in the days of old they continue to benefit a select few. As it was during the colonial era, so today, whatever prosperity there is in the region seems to be enjoyed in the main by the predominantly non-black minority while poverty keeps chasing the mainly black majority. This economic imbalance has prompted an observer of the Caribbean scene to remark that 'there is nothing with which poverty coincides so absolutely as with the colour black—small or large population, hot or cold climates, rich or poor in natural resources—poverty cuts across all of p. 333 these factors in order to find black people'.¹⁴

As this century draws to a close, one of the most daunting challenges the Caribbean faces is to 'find ways to effect profound systematic changes that will lead to an improvement in the material conditions of [its] citizens'.¹⁵ This challenge takes on even greater proportions when considered in light of the fact that in recent years the powers that were largely responsible for the present shape of the region have joined forces to create a new economic order that makes little or no room for their former colonies.¹⁶ With their traditional products no longer considered coveted items by the dwellers of the metropolises, the region's independent territories are facing a real crisis.

Based on the conviction that Christian faith is not a speculative faith but one that addresses itself to matters which touch life in all its concreteness, we find it legitimate to search for insights that Christian faith might contribute to the satisfaction of the Caribbean people's longing for material well-being. My questioning of the faith leads me to suggest three lines of thought for further probing.

First, if we begin with the assumption that Christian faith does not espouse a pessimistic stance toward life, we must refrain from assessing the current predicament in totally negative terms. While adhering to a sober realism, we must search for the possibilities that are latent in it and exploit them to the fullest. It may well be that the abandonment of the region by its former masters is a *kairos* that should be seized for renewal and transformation. Inherent in it may be the opportunity to break decisively with an old and worn-out order and to begin a new dispensation with better promise for the future.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*, p. 51.

¹³ By servant economies I mean economies that exist mainly to supply agricultural goods, raw materials and labour to industrial nations.

¹⁴ Walter Rodney cited by Colin Palmer, 'Identity, Race and Black Power in Independent Jamaica' in *Modern Caribbean*, pp. 117–118.

¹⁵ Franklin Knight and Colin Palmer, 'The Caribbean' in *Modern Caribbean*, p. 18.

¹⁶ I am thinking particularly of the formation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the European Single Market. These large trading blocs pose a serious challenge to the competitiveness of the Caribbean by forcing the removal of special concessions the region enjoyed in the past.

Second, if we take seriously the notion that the earth is owned by God and is bequeathed to humanity by him, we will consider whatever portion of it we occupy a sacred trust of which we are stewards. As stewards, it behooves us to appreciate the trust and to manage it faithfully and diligently ([Matt. 25:14–30](#)). To discard and mismanage the trust is to show contempt for the Giver and prove ourselves unworthy of it ([Matt. 25:24, 25](#)).

Appreciation for the trust and worthiness of it are shown by handling it in such a way that it fulfils more fully the purpose for which it was created, namely, the enhancement of human well-being. Having been made God's collaborators, our greater enjoyment of his gift is contingent upon our faithful discharge of the mandate to 'work it and to care for it' ([Gen. 2:15](#)). In a real sense our welfare depends on what [p. 334](#) we do with the gift ([Matt. 25:24–30](#)).

I am not here suggesting that the Caribbean people have been delinquent in the fulfilment of this responsibility. They have not. But due to factors that they could not control their obedience was misplaced. For centuries they have laboured in the building of *other* lands for the enjoyment of *other* people. The possibility of the present predicament consists in the opportunity that it offers them to rise and start building their *own* share of the bequest for their *own* well-being. The Caribbean was once prosperous. And the prosperity came about through the hard work of the poor and underprivileged. If its people come together, prosperity may return. There will be difficulties and even obstacles, but this undertaking is God-ordained, hence with determination, diligence, discipline, and God's help, it will succeed ([Ezra 3, 4, 6](#); [Neh. 3, 4, 5, 6](#)).

Thirdly, more fundamental than the foregoing is faith's insistence that well-being be a collective experience. Nations can be mobilized to create and amass wealth but in the perspective of Christian faith unless such wealth results in the improvement of life for the collectivity it falls far short of the divine intention. The concern of Christian faith is not economic prosperity *per se*, but prosperity which serves human well-being. Prosperity which coexists with human wretchedness is scandalous. For the *raison d'être* of things material is not accumulation but the satisfaction of needs.

God's ideal is a poverty free society ([Gen. 2:28:31](#); [Deut. 15:4](#); [Rev. 7:9–17](#)). Now this ideal may not be fully realizable at this time due to the prevailing condition of fallenness. But biblical faith refuses to settle for its total negation. Rather it pushes for the mitigation of the reality brought about by the Fall.¹⁷ Until its full actualization, faith strives for an economic relationship driven by an equalizing vision. In the here and now, faith cries out for a social order that promotes collective well-being, not simply through the exploitation of God's gifts, but more importantly through the avoidance of extremes of wealth and poverty.

Critical to the realization of this vision is a commitment to social justice and the practice of economic sharing. As Ronald Sider has shown, taken together, these virtues ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth, guard against marginalization, and in so doing maintain dignity and humanity. Where they are lacking, inequity prevails, suffering and despoliation abound. God is offended, and intervenes in judgement.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ronald Sider makes this point with great force in his *Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984). Sider argues that the point of Old Testament social legislation regarding the Year of Jubilee, the Sabbatical Year, Tithing and Gleaning was to reduce the economic imbalance that normally results in a system that does not represent God's ideal.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

III PERSONHOOD GROUNDED IN THE DIVINE YES

Racially and demographically the transformation and the divide **p. 335** created by the past in the Caribbean are no less striking. As a consequence of Columbus' visit, the Caribbean ceased being a uni-racial society and became a multi-racial one. Now there is nothing wrong with multi-racialism, but the manner in which it was introduced in the region was meant to foster divisiveness, strife and a poor sense of self.

Having destroyed most of the Amerindian population through hard labour and unfamiliar diseases only fifty years after their arrival, the colonisers quickly replaced the decimated population with black slaves shipped mainly from the West Coast of Africa through the infamous slave trade. When that traffic in people came to an end centuries later, indentured workers were brought into the region from India, China and several other places to meet the labour shortage created in the aftermath of emancipation. But in the mind of the colonisers the newcomers were to provide more than labour. They were to be the means whereby white domination would be perpetuated. The hope was that 'the division of race, religion, language and culture could prevent the people from ever effectively uniting against white control'.¹⁹ Hence utilizing the tactic of divide and rule, the planters kept the dominated groups at bay one from the other, doing 'what they could to discourage cooperation between the races'.²⁰

The social consequences of this practice has been a racial and ethnic eclecticism devoid of any cementing ethos. The region accommodates a vast array of races, ethnicities and various shades of pigmentation resulting from centuries of continuous biological mixture. Knight and Palmer rightly assert that the Caribbean is 'an unusual collection of societies with a population that is different from any other region in the world'.²¹ Harboursing virtually all the major ethnic groups in the world, the Caribbean has become a real microcosm.

The manoeuvre employed by the colonisers was very successful. The seed of mistrust they sowed did result in an ethnically fractured region. Rather than a relatively homogeneous group the Caribbean, in the main, has become a complex form of overlapping division of class and race.²² And the practice has done even greater damage. It is at the root of a crisis of identity which manifests itself at both the personal and collective level.

At the personal level those who were subjected to centuries of racial and cultural devaluation have found it difficult to shake off the feelings of self doubt, self depreciation and even self-hate they have come to accept as normal. As long as this mindset persists a positive self-concept cannot be formed. But who can move forward without this basic asset?

At the collective level, the forging **p. 336** of a regional consciousness is no less formidable. During this century there has been a serious search for authentic Caribbeanness. But in this amazingly plural society consensus has so far proved elusive. There are those who advocate Eurocentricity as the cultural ideal toward which we should strive. Others, contending that this would amount to a prolongation of the colonial

¹⁹ Brigitte Brereton, 'Society and Culture in the Caribbean', *The Modern Caribbean*, p. 96.

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 97.

²¹ Knight and Palmer, *opus cited*, pp. 1, 2.

²² *ibid.* p. 7.

past, propose *mulatez* as an alternative.²³ But while *mulatez* may appear appealing due to its transracial character, it is no more representative than Eurocentricity. Ethnically it is a minority and culturally it can be as detached from mainstream Caribbean life as Eurocentricity.

In a region with a predominantly black population, it is not surprising that blackness, in its various formulations, has been proposed as an index of identity. Ideologically, whether presented in the form of *Negrismo*, Black Power, Rastafarianism, or *Negritude*, the emphasis falls on a call for an appreciation of, and sensitivity to, black cultural uniqueness, including a recovery and a defence of African roots. Certainly black consciousness has many virtues, but as an index of regional identity, blackness is not without its problems. As has been pointed out by many Caribbean thinkers, the understanding of black culture and the retrieval and defence of African ancestry that are advocated often display a generalizing tendency which is idealistic.²⁴ Often one finds an appeal ‘to a transhistorical negro essence, which tends to overlook “national particularity” and “historical concreteness”’.²⁵ Further, although blackness is more representative than the other concepts, it still falls short of being inclusive.

The difficulties inherent in these ethnically specific proposals have led many thinkers to call for something more culturally syncretic and regionally comprehensive. Caribbeaness they rightly maintain must be socio-ethnically inclusive.²⁶ But herein lies the challenge. How to arrive at a conceptuality that accommodates *both* national specificity *and* pan-Caribbean resonance, both ethnic particularity *and* cultural manifoldness? This question is yet to be answered. Surely the ideal is one that is worth pursuing, but probably it will be some time before it is reached—if ever.

Our purpose here is not to offer yet another proposal for Caribbean identity. Rather, the argument of this section is that in the perspective of Christian faith, neither the racial and cultural devaluation that many p. 337 inhabitants of the region have suffered, nor the deficit of corporate consciousness which is felt at regional level needs result in an inhibiting crisis of identity. Although Christian faith acknowledges the appropriateness of a sense of racial and cultural belonging ([Rom. 9:11](#)), it assigns to it only a penultimate place in the definition of human identity ([Matt. 12:46ff](#)). For Christian faith the ultimate locus of identity is the divine affirmation extended to every human being irrespective of race and culture.

God’s unqualified yes to us is loudly expressed in creation and redemption. Earlier we attempted to spell out the significance of these doctrines for Caribbean solidarity. Here we would like to maintain that this twin theological concept shows God as being particularly significant for human existence. Rightly understood, the Christian concepts of creation and redemption provide a sufficient ground and an adequate anchorage for the formation of a positive self-concept.

²³ ‘Mulatez’ describes the ethnic characteristic resulting from the miscegenation of a Caucasian and a black.

²⁴ Roberto Marquez, ‘Nationalism, Nation and Ideology: Trends in the Emergence of a Caribbean Literature’ in *The Modern Caribbean*, p. 317.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Among the proponents of this view mention can be made of Luis Palés Matos of Puerto Rico, Jacques Roumain of Haiti, Walcott of St Lucia and Edouard Glissant of Martinique. Walcott would like the ethnic melange that is present in the Caribbean to be refashioned in a new humanity that transcends race. For his part Glissant is convinced that the concept of *Antillanité* is the preferred option he calls on the Antilleans to create out of their complex inheritance.

Christian faith is emphatic in its assertion that the human person is a creature endowed with intrinsic value and worth. Worth is an innate attribute which is in no way related to the accidents of birth, level of intelligence, and record of achievements. It is a gift granted to all who qualify to bear the epithet human. The gift is shared by the learned and the unschooled, the savage and the civilized, the wealthy and the poor, the religious and the profane, the child and the adult, the bed-ridden, sick and the healthy, the black, the brown, the yellow, the red and the white.

In the history of humankind, there is no-one who upheld the dignity of humans better than Jesus himself—the ideal Man. His very taking on of human flesh was an eloquent statement of the value of human nature. ‘The incarnation of the Son of God is the great and ultimate proof of the importance of man ... [It] confirms the value of man in God’s eyes ...’²⁷ He was emphatic that nothing in the world can compete with the value of human beings. For to gain the world and forfeit oneself is nothing short of a real disaster. Our materialistic culture may not appreciate the import and weight of this stance, but underlying it, is a solid and irrevocable ontological assumption: in *essence* the human person knows no superior except God himself.

Jesus said that the reason for his coming into the world was to serve the world. He gave substance to this claim by the vast array of service he rendered to humanity. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, taught the ignorant, lifted the spirit of the brokenhearted, defended the victimized and, most importantly, died for humanity.

To say that God Incarnate died for humanity is to say a great deal about the value that he places on it. Would he die for worthless nobodies? But God’s redemptive act was not merely a grandiose statement designed to provide a psychological lift to depressed humans. No. Redemption is meant to impact fundamentally the ontological status of human beings. To experience it is to [p. 338](#) become a new creation ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). To respond positively to God’s overture of love is to be automatically elevated to a status hitherto unknown: sons and daughters of God ([Gal. 4:4ff](#)). This is no trivial matter. The mere thought of it prompted John the apostle to exclaim: ‘How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God’ ([1 John 3:1](#)).

But on what basis can the dignity of humanity be affirmed? On one thing only: God’s assessment of humankind. It is God himself who through creation endowed humanity with dignity. He made human beings the apex of the whole created order, by sharing with them something of his own nature: his image and likeness. In the order of creation, humanity is second only to God ([Psa. 8:5](#)).²⁸ Small wonder then that God has made human beings his vice-regents, thus granting them a measure of sovereignty ([Gen. 1:27ff](#)).

Significant as this is, it is the divine image we bear which gives us our distinctive value. William Temple expressed it well when he wrote: ‘My worth is what I am worth to God, and that is a marvellous great deal, for Christ died for me.’²⁹ The truth that Temple expressed from the perspective of redemption, a young black American enunciated colourfully and enthusiastically from the standpoint of creation. In protest against the feelings of inferiority that were being inculcated in him by white racists, he posted a banner in his room with the words: ‘I’m me and I’m good ‘cause God don’t make no junk.’³⁰ He couldn’t be more correct theologically.

²⁷ Phillip E. Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 85.

²⁸ In his *The Majesty of Man* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1984), p. 72, Ronald Allen argues that a more literal rendering of [Ps 8:5](#) is: ‘You have made him [man] a little lower than God’.

²⁹ Cited by John Stott. *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 282.

³⁰ Related in Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

Through creation and redemption God affirms *all*. He issued an identity card to all, acknowledging them as his descendants and himself as their common Originator. He further confirms their intrinsic worth by refusing to confirm them in their fallenness and by seeking them redemptively in Christ and inviting them to enter into an intimate relationship with him.

This removes all justification for the belief in ethnic prejudice. F.F. Bruce has said: 'Neither in nature nor in grace—neither in the old creation nor in the new—is there any room for ideas of racial superiority'.³¹ Bruce is certainly right. But I would add that there is here no room for a feeling of racial inferiority or a sense of nobodiness.

IV HOPE SUSTAINED BY FAITH IN DIVINE PROVIDENCE

As we stand on the threshold of the third millennium, hope is not the prevailing mood of the Caribbean P. 339 people. Living in a context characterized by material scarcity and deprivation many lose confidence in the capacity of the region to contribute meaningfully to the actualization of their potential, and the fulfilment of their being. Considering the limitedness of the opportunities it offers, they rule out summarily its ability to facilitate the realization of human aspirations, and to convert dreams into reality. The prevailing outlook considers the negativity of the present too formidable to be conquered by any positivity that might arise in the future. There is a strong scepticism as to whether the darkness that now prevails can be dissipated by the light that may shine from the future.

In the view of many influential Caribbean writers, the unfitness of the Caribbean context to promote human fulfilment is rooted in the nature of the Caribbean experience itself. Put succinctly, the Caribbean experience is that of a disparate band dislodged from its original habitat, transplanted and scattered into a new, hostile and incoherently constituted environment, divested of the assets of peoplehood, and abandoned to fashion a future. For many, this experience, characterized as it is by violation of self and divestment of being, is devoid of any historical basis. It has no positive content and thus cannot constitute the basis for any new departure. Void is the only starting point; but what can result from emptiness except nothingness?

Vidia S. Naipaul, for example, is emphatic that 'Nothing' was created in the West Indies, so Nothing is all that can ever be created there.³² Obviously, an existence which is historyless and hemmed in by nothingness is purposeless, directionless and futile. Orlando Patterson makes this plain in his *An Absence of Ruins*. In that work Patterson puts on the lips of curious Londoners questions of identity, origin and destiny, for a Caribbean man whom they saw wandering about their city. In his answer, the wanderer could not be more forthright about the rootlessness, absurdity and futility of his life:

I came from nowhere worth mentioning. I have no past except the haunting recollection of each passing moment which comes to me always as something having been lost. My ancestors, if they existed, left no record of themselves ... I cannot say whether I am civilized or savage, standing as I do outside of race, outside of culture, outside of history, outside of any value that could make your question meaningful. I am busy going nowhere, but I must

³¹ F.F. Bruce, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

³² Cited by Gordon Rohlehr. 'Man's Spiritual Search in the Caribbean Through Literature' in *Troubling of the Waters*, Idris Hamid, ed. (San Fernando: Rahaman, 1973), p. 188.

keep up the appearance of going in order to forget that I am not, so if you'll excuse me, I will be on my way.³³

Derek Walcott, the 1993 Nobel Prize Winner for literature, is much less pessimistic than both Naipaul and Patterson about the capacity of the Caribbean to create, but he is no less certain about the historical deficit p. 340 and the rootlessness of the region's inhabitants:

Slaves, the children of slaves, colonials, then pathetic, unpunctual nationalists, what have we to celebrate? First we have not wholly sunk into our own landscapes, as one gets the feeling at funerals that our bodies make only light, unlasting impressions on our earth. It is not on earth that has been fed long with the mulch of cultures, with the cycles of tribalisms, feudalism, monarchy, democracy, industrialization. Death, which fosters us to the earth, remains pastoral or brutish, because no simple corpse contributes to some tiered concept of a past.³⁴

If by history one means only a positive past then it may be correct to speak of the Caribbean people as historyless. Admittedly, most of our past is negative. But that deficiency would not be the plight of the Caribbean alone. To some extent historylessness would apply to all people since none can claim a totally positive past. But it is not correct to view history in such a reductionist fashion. History is more inclusive than that. It encompasses the positive, the ambiguous and the negative. While the positive elements lend themselves more readily for the project of peoplehood, the negative features should not be summarily dismissed as useless to the process. Identity and character are formed and fashioned by the impact of both positive and negative emulation.

And in any case while the Caribbean's past may be disproportionately negative, it is not totally bereft of positive elements. However few they may be, these form a base for a new departure. As intimated earlier, Walcott parted company with many of his contemporaries in affirming the possibility of a new departure. For him historylessness need not lead to futurelessness. Renewal is not only possible, it is a unique opportunity for the Caribbean people.³⁵ We agree with Walcott here, but as will be argued below, providentially even the negative past that he and others disown, may be used constructively in the fashioning of the positive future that he yearns for.

Additionally, if any significance is attached to the fact of God's appointment of humanity as his coregent in the administration of the affairs of this world, it is not farfetched to say that wherever human beings are there is potential for progress and betterment. As Walcott himself wrote in his *Another Life*: 'We were blessed with a virginal, unpainted world/with Adam's task of giving things their names'.³⁶

These considerations by themselves should suffice to temper the prevailing mood of crippling despair and paralyzing hopelessness. But, as hinted at above, an even firmer ground for the anchoring of hope is the Christian notion of divine providence. Providence is a multifaceted, p. 341 and at points, controversial doctrine. Hence no attempt will be made here to offer a full treatment of it, or to enter the perennial debate.³⁷ Rather, one

³³ Orlando Patterson. *An Absence of Ruins* (London: Hutchinson 1967), p. 159.

³⁴ Derek Walcott. 'What the Twilight Says: An Overture', *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1970), pp. 20, 21.

³⁵ Pat Ismond, 'Walcott's Caribbean Odyssey' *Caribbean Beat*. No. 5 (Spring 1993): 54-57.

³⁶ Cited by Pat Ismond, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

³⁷ For a recent treatment of the doctrine of providence see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1994).

facet of the doctrine which has particular relevance for our purpose will be chosen for special focus, namely, God's redemptive superintendence.

Redemptive superintendence refers to God's providential working whereby evil happenings are countervailed and prevented from producing their intended destructive ends. It speaks of God's activity in controlling, counteracting and reorienting the doings of human beings so that they may issue in nobler ends than intended by their authors. It underscores God's ability to astonishingly produce salutary results out of acts which are meant to bring about destructive outcomes.

Redemptive superintendence affirms both God's respect for the free will of people, and his sovereign control over their affairs. God persuades and lures us to behave in accordance with his purpose, but he does not coerce us into obedience. He allows persons to act in ways which oppose his plan but he does not permit evil deeds, however heinous, to produce an outcome which nullifies his ultimate design. Rather, he is at work redirecting the effects of mischievous acts to worthy ends unintended by their perpetrators. Sovereign, 'He overrules for good [even] the crimes of His enemies'.³⁸

Caribbean theologian William Watty has suggested that God was not asleep during the Middle Passage.³⁹ He is correct. But it should be added that he was not asleep during the subsequent dark moments of the Caribbean experience. Nor is he asleep now. And as long as the superintending God has not left us there is ground for genuine hope. For in the perspective of Christian faith, imperceptible though it may be, God is always at work countervailing the present negativities so that his purpose may prevail—and his purpose is always good.

CONCLUSION

As the twenty first century is about to dawn, the Caribbean region faces enormous challenges. Here and now it must address issues of abiding significance. And the way it handles them will impact its future for ill or good. Surely as Peter Johnson has said, 'the Caribbean is at the Crossroads'.⁴⁰

Our contention throughout this paper is that although the issues are deep-seated and daunting the region p. 342 need not crumble under the weight of its problems. It can not only achieve survival, but viability as well. In this quest for a better future, Christian faith, if allowed, can function as an ally. For example, rightly understood, its concepts of creation and redemption can generate a pull toward togetherness which can be an important source of strength in a region which is known for its weakness. Also, because these notions provide a sufficient basis for the formation of a healthy sense of self, if appropriated, they can help Caribbean people to by-pass their multiracialism and forge an identity 'that goes beyond race'.⁴¹ United, sure of who they are in God's sight, and understanding their role as stewards of God's gift, they are better equipped to set about the task of managing God's trust faithfully for the well-being of all. In the discharge of this God-given mandate, the knowledge that not even a negative past can stand in the way of

³⁸ Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest. *Integrative Theology*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1990), p. 78.

³⁹ William Watty. *From Shore to Shore: Soundings In Caribbean Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica), p. 14, 15; and 'the De-Colonisation of Theology' in Idris Hamid, *op. cit.*, pp. 73–75.

⁴⁰ Peter Johnson. 'Caribbean at the Crossroads', *Caribbean Beat*, No. 4 (Winter 1994): 71–74.

⁴¹ Pat Ismond, *op. cit.*, p. 57. Ismond is here providing an interpretation of Walcott's view on race.

the fulfilment of God's purpose provides a confidence and a hope that no circumstance can dash.

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The Christian Calling in the Modern World

Rolf Hille

ON THE WAY TO A POSTMODERN AND POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

The early church had to find its way within the Roman empire. The Imperium Romanum stood for a worldwide political system with a common cultural heritage. Society was marked by pluralism expressed by various religious cults, philosophical systems and personal ideologies. Within this environment Christians were willing to suffer persecution as well as to express apologetically the evidence of their faith to the outside world with a clear and efficient strategy. This made them convincing and attractive for their pagan environment.

The post-Constantinian era we call from our historical perspective the Middle Ages. This period of world history lasting a thousand years is usually known as the era of the Christian Occident.

The following so-called modern period, starting with the 16th century, was accompanied by an increasingly critical reaction towards the basis of the Christian culture, the church and theology. The idea that the human being is good becomes dominant. Since the Enlightenment, human thought is marked by an optimistic view of world history and high expectations of the rational abilities of humankind. The now autonomous human reason rejected many of the traditions of the Christian past as mere restrictions.

After World War II increasingly a new constellation became visible that today still confines Western culture. This era is called the postmodern period. Obviously, since Auschwitz and Hiroshima moral optimism and the expectation of historical progress have largely disappeared. People no longer believe that modern science is really able by itself to solve the problems it has produced. Here I point for an example to the ecological crisis. The modern period is particularly marked by an unlimited pluralism which we as the church are confronted with today. The modern period was characterized by the illusion that through mere human reason the problems of humanity could not only be understood, but also be resolved. At the end of the 20th century it becomes [p. 344](#) obvious that the once Christian West no longer has spiritual clarity nor a cultural identity that will allow for an efficient response to the opposing ideological challenges.

In view of recent history we are dealing with a twofold change. The world of the Enlightenment originally was a reaction against the Christian tradition. Without its

Christian background the Enlightenment cannot really be understood. On the other hand, the postmodern period resembles a reaction against enlightened modernity, but now without seeing any necessity to deal with the Christian faith at all. The result of this is that the outgrowth of the postmodern world is a post-Christian situation.

LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD

We have to take into account the background information given above to deal seriously with our topic *The Christian Calling in the Modern World*. Before I unfold the subject in detail, I would like to discuss the importance of the preposition 'in' for the subject, because in our headline it bears quite some theological weight.

As Christian theologians we are talking of the calling of the church in the modern world. This basically means: we live and believe in the midst of this postmodern and post-Christian world. With this in mind we emphasize that we do not intend to withhold our service from this world nor that we can withdraw from this world.

The position which we are assuming as Christians has a special element to it which becomes evident when we compare the Christian faith with the main religions and ideologies. The teaching of redemption of Buddha is religiously and psychologically oriented. It primarily intends to point out how people can leave behind the present world with its problems, desires and its suffering. Different again is the relation between religion and the world in Islam: a Muslim can hardly imagine an environment that is not defined by Islamic law, the Sharia. A close identity between the social and political reality and the religious community of Muslims is desirable. For a Muslim it is difficult to think of living in the diaspora; followers of Islam often have enormous problems with such a situation. There is no call in the Koran for Muslims to be a small minority among a large majority like the leaven in the dough. Finally, Marxism as a secular ideology was also not willing to accept the liberal and pluralistic world as it presented itself. The totalitarian states of the east could endure the present world only through the prospect of a violent and innerworldly realization of their utopian socialist goals.

In contrast, as Christians we are called to stay in this modern post-Christian world and to persevere in this world as disciples of Jesus Christ. The reason for the test of persevering in this world is a Christological one: the eternal Son of God has humbled himself and became human in no other world than our world with all its misery and pain. For this reason we are supposed to follow him on his way. The incarnational humiliation of Christ motivates and enables us to ask for the 'Christian calling in the modern world' p. 345. We are not supposed to try as individuals or as a church to flee this modern world, because Christ longs to redeem our secular generation. As the body of Christ we are taken up into the movement of the incarnation—with the goal of salvation for many.

I would like to approach three areas of the Christian calling in the modern world. In doing so I will follow the statement of the apostle Paul: 'And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love' ([1 Cor. 13:13](#)). This means that we are dealing with a contemporary introduction to what traditionally is called theological virtues.

1. MODERN AGNOSTICISM AND THE CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE OF FAITH

For the modern human being it is a source of deep disillusionment to recognize that every effort to bring the mysteries of this world into a simple and systematic formula has failed. In the 18th century the world still seemed to be a kind of a machine that was designed according to mechanical principles and functioned according to mathematical rules. But

the physical and astronomical reality appeared to be increasingly more complicated. The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn has clearly proved that even the so-called exact natural sciences depend on a process of rapid change. He has shown that views of nature are replaced by others through a revolutionary process. Finally, the 'scientific revolutions' contributed to the fact that modern philosophy ended in a kind of agnosticism. This means that there is no way of understanding the universal truth by means of 'pure reason'. The longer we exclusively apply the method of mathematically designed cognition and longer we allow this method to be the only way of obtaining certain knowledge in every area of research, the more clearly we have to admit that no statements regarding essential metaphysical questions are rationally justifiable. Kant's three famous questions regarding our Problem are: 'Where do I come from? Where am I going? What shall I do?' In his famous *Tractatus logico philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein notes that after all scientific questions have been answered the essential problems of the human being are just beginning. He ends his *Tractatus-philosophy* with the realistic, but depressive insight that we have to be silent about all the things that we cannot speak about. And the things he was thinking about are all the pressing problems of classical metaphysics.

In view of the fact that we are surrounded by agnostic arguments, what does our calling to be evangelical theologians consist of? First, the disillusionment that relates to positivism and analytical linguistic philosophy contains some important aspects. What helped me personally in this context was the exegesis of the Pauline epistles, particularly to the Romans and Corinthians, as well as my studies of the Reformation. Studying Scripture, Luther found that, contrary to late medieval theology, it is impossible for fallen human beings to redeem [p.346](#) themselves through good works. We do not find salvation through moral efforts, but only through God's grace. God justifies the sinner because of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Christ alone brings reconciliation. This is particularly the message of Romans.

Parallel to this, in our agnostic postmodern world, it is important to note the corresponding opening chapters of 1 Corinthians. According to Paul, it is not only impossible to redeem human beings through their moral capabilities, but it is also an illusion to expect to gain certain assurance regarding the ultimate questions of the human personhood by pure reason. It is indeed correct that human beings being made in the image of God are characterized primarily by their ability to will and to think. But since the fall both basic human potentials—human will and reason—are no longer sufficient to reestablish the broken connection between God and the human being. By pure reason alone we cannot find assurance of faith through any worldview.

In spite of this inability the human being as a spiritual being depends on a reliable grounding of his or her life. Thomas Aquinas describes this reality as the tragedy of the *animal rationale*, as he characterizes the human being. According to Aquinas, the intellectual strength of the human being is not able to overcome the problem of the human misery 'beyond Eden'. At the break of the modern period Blaise Pascal also in his *Pensees* talked about the limitation of our rational cognition with great clarity and insight.

This means that it is and remains exclusively by God's grace that a person who by nature is lost in agnosticism finds solid ground for his or her life through the gift of faith. Luther has expressed this with unequalled brevity and precision in his Small Catechism: 'I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in my Lord Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel ...'

For this reason as evangelical theologians we may not substantiate the illusion that we could lead our agnostic neighbours to faith in Christ through mere rational argumentation. Recognizing this, I would like at the same time to point out that our apologetical task remains and that we have to make use of every one of our intellectual

capabilities. On the other hand, in the context of the discussion about cognition theory we have to mark clearly the limits of pure reason. We have to point out the above insight that human beings cannot exist autonomously. People depend on the grace of God and this applies also in respect to their potential for cognition. Consequently, we should try to remove every intellectual barrier that keeps the academic elite from opening up to the gospel. We are challenged to communicate the biblical gospel in such a way that is relevant for the modern world and intellectually coherent.

Another important reason to take up the challenge of postmodern thought is that Western science will sooner or later permeate every culture, because other nations are trying to share in the welfare of the Northwestern societies. This is also [p. 347](#) why these nations are interested in acquiring the knowhow of modern civilization. In this context we have the special missiological responsibility to help in particular the churches of the Two-thirds World to handle appropriately the intellectual problems of Western philosophy. If we as theologians in the West are not able to handle theologically the challenging questions of our own culture in a spiritual way, how can we expect that our brothers and sisters in Africa, Asia and Latin America will be able to master those problems?

2. MODERN HEDONISM AND THE CHRISTIAN DYNAMIC OF HOPE

When modern society was being formed, based on the ideas of the 18th and 19th century, it was characterized by a strong impulse of hope and high expectations of a great future for humankind. And indeed the progress of modern natural sciences followed by technical industrial production and rising medical standards caused life to become easier and more comfortable. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset has shown that today's average citizen enjoys more privileges than the elite of former times—Kings, aristocracy or ecclesial hierarchy. This fact points toward the intentions of Ludwig Feuerbach who requested to make out of 'candidates for the next world students of this world'. Feuerbach combined this perspective with the critical note that people had to be freed from the foolish Christian hopes for a future world in order to approach fully life here on earth.

But in this respect also conditions have fundamentally changed. The postmodern world has lost its optimism and the potential of hope seems quite exhausted. This is true in regard to individual as well as public conditions. When the eschatological goal is lost, all the expectations of a human being have to be pressed into the short span of life here on earth.

At the same time the modern person is still conditioned by the promise of the Enlightenment that the desire for happiness can be claimed as a basic (self evident) human right and that the political community has to fulfil the promise of happiness. Accordingly, the people of our generation have a pretty clear idea of how life on earth has to fulfil their expectations through luxury, lust and pleasures of every kind. Why should anybody renounce a personal advantage while there is such a vast variety of choices by which to enjoy life. The slogan: 'Let us eat and drink since tomorrow we die' widely determines Western civilization.

This attitude of hedonism is presumably the reason for the attractiveness of the Far Eastern idea of reincarnation. (The same idea, though, one finds also in Western philosophy in Plato and other thinkers.) Reincarnation seems to provide a second, third, and even further possibilities for another different and individually shaped plan for life. At the same time Europeans misunderstand and abuse the term rebirth. While Hindus and Buddhists hope to be freed from the burden of individual reincarnations, the Westerner

p. 348 sees in this philosophy a chance for a quantitative and excessive improvement of life.

One can also point out the basic position of modern hedonism in another context. For a long time the topic of sexuality was taboo in public discussion. At the same time, on the background of a Christian *ars moriendi*, i.e. the art of dying with dignity, one could talk openly about the experience of death in one's own family, one's neighbourhood, and so on. One was immediately confronted with the topic of death. Today the topic of sexuality is no long taboo, but instead the problem of death has become taboo. The thought of death is suppressed as far as possible in our modern society, because people have neither the courage nor the capability to face the problem of the end of life.

Since hedonism has become the dominant worldview, we should confront the modern person anew with the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In our world of facts nobody may expect people to believe that they can manage the difficult experience of death on the basis of myths or mere symbols. Facing the problems of human misery, illness and death one cannot proclaim redemption and fulfilment in a mere metaphorical way. Whoever wants to face reality can do so only by confronting the factual character of this world with totally different facts. For this reason the argumentation of the apostle Paul in [1 Corinthians 15, 1-8](#) remains of great significance for our situation. Only the historical fact of the resurrection has the power to lead people to seek an encounter with Christ who is alive today.

Only people who are not influenced by the fear of death can resist the temptations of our hedonistic society. Paul's conviction as seen in [Romans 8:18](#) enables and encourages Christians to sacrifice their lives for their neighbour: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time (and one probably could add: and the pleasures of this world) are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.' This hope opens people up to sharing earthly goods with the poor. It makes us willing to give away personal energy and time to those who need spiritual advice and practical aid.

The martyrs of the early church challenged the Hellenistic world of their day with its speculation about the immortality of the soul by their definite hope of the resurrection of the dead. I am convinced that as Christians in our modern world we have to rethink how we can proclaim the content of eschatological hope in a practical way. We should take courage to proclaim again the biblical message of the Judgement Day in an unrestricted manner. This applies to the promise of eternal life as well as to that of judgement and punishment. Only in this way can we establish the real historical context in which the coming rule of God can be stated and in which his rule can be proved to be relevant and evident. The horizon of time has to be rediscovered *sub specie aeternitatis* i.e. 'living with eternity in view'.

Another important aspect that should motivate us to focus clearly on the eschatological perspectives p. 349 of the Christian hope is the encounter with modern writers such as, for example, Franz Kafka. In his contributions, *The Castle* and *The Trial*, he describes emphatically what the result is when the modern person attempts to take on the role of Christ on Judgement Day. Where could we as people flee if we all blame and accuse each other and, at the same time, each one is the judge of his or her neighbour? In Germany we are currently painfully suffering from this problem. At first, after the fall of the wall and the reunification of our country, the church in Eastern Germany was highly respected as a kind of resistance movement against the communist regime. But step by step many files are being disclosed proving that the secret service of the former GDR was able to infiltrate the church through many spies. Many people working in the church made themselves available to and became informative collaborators of the secret service.

How shall we deal with all the human failures, the confusion and guilt that is revealed on every level of society, if we are responsible only to the institutions of this world and its courts? Who has the moral right to condemn those who became guilty under the heavy burdens of a dictatorship? In our political context the question of forgiving and reconciliation has become a pressing social problem. For this reason, not too long after the fall of the Berlin wall the German Evangelical Alliance chose the following sentence of the Lord's Prayer as the theme for its 1992 annual conference in Bad Blankenburg: 'And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. As Christians it is our particular responsibility to demonstrate the seriousness of human sin as well as to proclaim the wonderful offer of forgiveness through Jesus Christ into the hopeless situation of the guilty.

Finally, to the background of guilt and atonement we can also convincingly approach the theodicy question. We cannot blame God for all the misery in the world, but people have to humble themselves and expose themselves to God's judgment in order to receive justification through grace alone.

3. THE FACT OF MORAL DISORIENTATION AND THE CHANGING POWER OF CHRISTIAN LOVE

If we entrust ourselves to the ideals of modernity, then the highest ambition of a human being is to become an autonomous personality. The highest goal is to become in all decision-making completely independent of moral judgements that are based only on tradition. Kant defined this goal of the Enlightenment in classical manner as the 'exodus of the human being out of an immaturity that was brought about by one's own fault'. This goal exposes the immature world citizen to the slogan: *sapere aude* (dare to make use of your intellect). The opposite position to this modern ethical autonomy, heteronomy, is the dependence on outer conditions, which means, the position that alienates the human being from him or herself simply by imposed traditions and fixed laws.

The fact of the resurrection provides [p. 350](#) a new understanding and a basically new experience beyond the contrasts of absolute self-determination and external determination, which goes far beyond the ethical alternatives of autonomy and heteronomy. The grounding of this tertium is the Easter event. Immediately before his ascension Jesus revealed himself as Lord in the presence of his disciples: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'. With this statement Christ emphasizes the fact that the Great Commission is rooted in the truth of his personal resurrection. By this the truth of the Christian faith is fundamentally distinguished from that of the founders of the religions and the great philosophers of the past. Their personal mandate unquestionably ended with their death. After their death their words were collected as literature and still have to be carefully preserved. The only way in which founders of religions and philosophers could influence intellectual history is in so far as the traditions that they left behind were preserved. Those who follow them are dealing with mere historical events and facts. Such a situation is very distant from the interaction of people who are living today and are communicating with each other.

Evangelical theology again and again has to become aware of the fact that it is dealing not only with the great historical past of Christianity, but with the living God who is present through the risen Christ. Because Christ is given all authority, theologians can express his words not only through literature, but also through continuous reference to Christ as one who is active today. I think this is one of the most important contrasting elements between evangelical and so-called historicalcritical theologians. The latter work with Scripture only on the basis of a historical approach. But there is an essential

difference between the effort to preserve for future generations the teaching of a prophet or a philosopher of the past who is now dead and the activity of the almighty Lord who reveals his word and works his miracles always anew throughout history. Those words that he spoke 2000 years ago prove today to be a living power, because Christ is the same Lord yesterday, today and for ever.

Christ is the only one who truly builds the bridge between transcendence and immanence, between heaven and earth. Through his incarnation he provides for the continuous fellowship between God and humankind. For this reason evangelical theologians can never follow the methodological atheism of secular science that is based on its presuppositions and thinks 'as if there were no God' (*etsi deus non daretur*). In contrast, real Christian theology grows out of the encounter of the learning disciple with the teaching Christ, of the theologian who is thinking about divine revelation with God who is revealing himself. This reality of the encounter of the theologian with Christ that is dominant in every theological reflection consequently requires that the theologian respect the presence of the living Lord. Theological reflection, by its very nature, is, therefore, possible only with the attitude of a humble servant, who hears the voice of his [p. 351](#) or her Lord and who bows down before him. God shows us the way that we are supposed to go through the concrete experience of divine guidance by means of his word and Spirit.

If I am not mistaken, against the background of the intellectual history of modernity, Jesus' word of [John 7, 16f](#) takes on a significant-meaning: 'Then Jesus answered them: My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.'

With these words Jesus also encourages the modern person who is primarily focused on empirical knowledge and its practical verification. Jesus invites people to experience his presence. In the adventure of realized and practised obedience of faith Jesus proves himself to be the Lord who is sent and authorized by God. Such a possibility of practically verifying a claim is important for people of our day who are completely oriented by their experiences. In the realm of faith they are supposed to experience the truth of Jesus by risking practical steps of discipleship and testing how the gospel carries through.

As a church we become attractive for people outside the walls of the church through obedience that is lived. Because if the love is visible, one can hear the message.

This means that Jesus' call for discipleship leads to a deep experience of the Christian calling that is of pressing importance today. The Christian calling cannot be compared with a job that one practises occasionally and as it seems right, but it is a necessity (*anangke*), which means an inescapable necessity. Paul expresses this in [1 Corinthians 9, 16](#) in a very personal way: 'If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!' This means that the apostle and missionary has an inner obligation that is comparable only to the prophetic passion of Jeremiah.

LEAVEN IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

I have tried primarily to develop the topic that was given to me from the personal aspects of the Christian witness. The reason for this is that I am convinced that my approach is in agreement with the biblical testimony. But the personal dimension points at the same time toward a necessary penetration of modern society, because personal responsibility does not at all exclude the public involvement of the church. Here the political sphere is also included. And it is only through the priesthood of all believers that the task of an active church of Jesus Christ can be publicly fulfilled. Only the church as a whole can fulfil

the Christian calling in respect to its political and social dimension. My ministry with Christian student outreach (SMD, the German branch of IFES) has shown me how important is the cooperation of academically trained people in the various disciplines. For example, the questions of medical ethics need to be solved in cooperation with Christian physicians. What can we as theologians [P. 352](#) say about the extremely difficult problems regarding the beginning and the end of life without listening to physicians who are intentionally following Christ? We can mention in particular the discussion about abortion and euthanasia. Groups of Christian engineers, psychologists, lawyers, scientists, and so on, are needed to demonstrate intellectual as well as practically how Christians can overcome in their work the challenges of the modern world.

This aspect of the priesthood of all believers in some respect justifies theologically and socially Friedrich Gogarten's theory of secularization as a positive liberation of the human being involvement in the world of work. The so-called 'lay person' especially can be a helpful example at work if her or his life is marked by a biblical ethic. Individual theologians' synodal committees and others should, therefore, carefully evaluate how far they are able to make themselves familiar with the complicated interrelations of the modern world. This is essential in order to make competent statements. As a church we should provide a basic biblical orientation to the political scene but we may not become personally involved in matters of political controversy and claim that we are speaking on behalf of God with prophetic authority.

What are our chances as a Christian minority to influence the post-modern and post-Christian society? Sociological investigations show that already one or two percent of the population of a society are sufficient to make a noticeable change in that society. Such an influence on a whole society certainly requires a qualified minority that has clear cut goals. We should note carefully that this fact is a challenge, because it means that as a Christian minority we can deeply influence Western society and, at the same time, avoid the misconception that future awakenings can be planned. The goal of a missionary penetration of the secular world is not success but the fruit that Christ has promised for his word.

PERSPECTIVES OF RENEWAL

In connection with the drastic changes that we have experienced in our world during the last three years, I remember an event that occurred in 1969. At the time of the student uprisings in Western Europe students held a so-called 'go in' during an assembly of 6000 people at the Kirchentag (a church rally) in Stuttgart. They uncovered a huge banner on which everyone could read: 'Jesus is dead. Marx is alive'. This was a typical phenomenon of modern secularism. In view of this provocation, Christians at that time had to ask themselves if there was still a chance for evangelism in a Europe that was marked by socialist utopias. Today, after the breakdown of world communism, the slogan 'Jesus is dead. Marx is alive' presents itself in a totally different light, because Marx is dead and Marxism-Leninism has come to its definite end—politically and ideologically.

For this reason we should consciously study the mystery of the church of Jesus Christ throughout church history. The mystery is that Christ protects his church and that he has continued to renew it [p. 353](#) throughout the centuries. I would like to illustrate this briefly from three extraordinary historical constellations:

Did everything not seem to be lost during the first centuries after Christ if, for example, one looks at the Diocletian persecutions? But Christ did not only strengthen the early church's faith. He also revealed himself as the living one, since the gospel penetrated the provinces of the Roman empire in spite of all the pagan resistance.

How dark and lost seemed the situation of the church during the era of the Renaissance popes. But in this difficult situation Christ initiated the Reformation, a renewal of his church from top to bottom. At the break of the 16th century nobody, from a human point of view, could predict such a deep change in the history of the church.

In the 19th century also the situation was extremely difficult. The crowds followed philosophers like Feuerbach and Marx who were critical of religion. But exactly at that time Christ gave the great awakening in North America and also many renewal movements in Europe. The result was a strong world-wide missionary movement that left behind strong marks of church growth in almost all countries of the Two-thirds World.

For this reason I would like to close with a perspective of hope. As evangelical theologians we are called to help the church of Christ in our day through solid teaching and research to fulfil better its calling in the modern world. The risen Christ alone is and remains the one who can give new motivation and new life for our post-Christian world. He is able to initiate a movement that we in our current conditions cannot even imagine. It is he who reveals himself as sovereign Lord of his church. His power is also active during persecution and in spite of small minorities. The reason for this is that his word has the power to generate renewal. Christ is Lord. Knowing that is sufficient in order to obey his calling in our modern world.

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The Crisis of Maturity in Africa

Isaac Zokoué

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

I must start by asking a practical question: what is the function of theology in the church and in society? If theology, in the strict sense, is man's discourse about God, it should function so as to restore men to the revelation of God in history. This revelation is, on the ultimate level, the incarnation of God in the history of mankind. Or to put it another way, theology functions by telling mankind how God can be united with it in its own existence, to change darkness into light, its slavery into liberty, its sadness into joy, its despair into hope, its poverty into wealth, its lostness into salvation. Theology, in the African context, can only hope to be speculative. It must consider the realities of a continent confronted by problems which, if they exist elsewhere as a common experience of mankind, take on the form of a curse in black Africa. It must mark out the road to follow for the African church which, confronted by a society ever more critical of it, is trying to find its own identity and spiritual maturity. It must indicate to African Christians the true role of authentic disciples of Jesus Christ, in a post-colonial society where the gospel needs to be lightened of all its colonial cultural weights.

Evangelical theology for the 21st century in Africa will certainly pass through a crisis of maturity. I use the term 'crisis', thinking of the conflict between conservative theology

and the necessity to evolve with the needs of the times. Adherence to the evangelical tradition is demonstrated in a profound conviction concerning the importance of God's word and how it is put into practice. This is not negotiable, nor to be confused with a certain conservatism by which some believe that the evangelical movement was designed and erected in the West, and was guarded only by those who know its secrets. The African church is being more and more constrained to redefine its theological stance. It needs a theology which will speak without inhibitions to the context in which it is evolving: political, economic, social, cultural and religious. That is why I am trying to relate these different domains to my treatment of the subject: 'faith and hope for the future'. p. 355

This introduction hasn't yet mentioned that the statisticians predict a galloping growth of the church in Africa. I will touch on this but only as a background. I will leave the details of this phenomenon to the Missions publications, in fear that basing my proposition on it alone I will give a 'mediation' of African churches. To tell the truth, few African church leaders place much confidence in the statistics published about their churches.

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Let us lay the theological foundation of our theme before trying to draw conclusions in the realms that we want to consider. Faith and hope are only two of three theological virtues (love is the third) that the apostle Paul gives in [1 Cor. 13:13](#).¹ They are concerned at the same time with the past, the present and the future and they all contain Christ. Faith is rooted in the work of the cross, in the death and resurrection of Christ and that is where it takes into account all our past. It also animates our present day walk with Christ, in the measure that the Resurrected One lives and acts in the present. Faith is not a simple intellectual assent: it plunges us into a communion of life—our daily life—with the living God. That signifies for the Christian that faith in the triune God sustains every aspect of his life.

Faith has also a future dimension. Christ not only was and is but he is also the One who is coming again ([Rev. 1:8](#)). Faith in Christ projects itself forward and becomes hope. The epistle to the Hebrews makes a marvellous link between faith and hope by declaring this: 'Faith is the assurance of things that we hope for, the demonstration of the things we do not see' ([Heb. 11:1](#)). Here then is an interpenetration of the present and the future. As for the future, Christian hope has its eye on a major event: the return of Jesus Christ, which has for its corollary the resurrection from the dead, and the inauguration of a new order of life (a new creation) where communion between God and mankind will be perfect. Nevertheless, if hope allows Christians to lift a confident look towards the future, it is not disconnected from the present. It cannot be because it is founded in Christ who lives and acts now. It is also the reason why, in the name of Christian hope, we must teach church members to look actively for solutions for all the problems they meet in life and society. The church is proof of the anticipation of an eternal kingdom even before the present earthly kingdom passes away and it is an obligation for the Christian to invest fully the values of the gospel in every part of human existence.

Thus faith and hope, in their eschatological dimensions, challenge us, in the etymological sense of interruption. More precisely, they challenge us in our African situation. In order for the African churches to carry faith and hope to the next century, we will have to accept the fact that there will be a break with some of the current religious habits, and that we begin to learn to understand the signs of the times in p. 356 Africa, or

¹ See also [Gal. 5:5-6](#), [Col. 1:4-5](#).

else we will be deceived by the 'historical regime'.² It is then with this perspective, and with the points made above, that I will succinctly put forward the questions to which evangelical theology must particularly address itself at the dawn of the 21st century. Because of the limited space available for these reflections, I can only raise the questions, then merely indicate the direction being taken in these areas as an element of the response.

POLITICAL QUESTIONS

To touch on questions of politics in Africa in a positive way requires quite some effort. For many years the word 'politics' was synonymous with one party government, dictatorship, torture, physical intimidation, coup d'état, bloody repression, refugees, and the sinister list continues. Nevertheless, politics in Africa, thank God, has been more than just this—from the north to the south of the continent, in no particular order, men such as Habib Bourguiba, Léopold Sedar Senghor, Kwame Nkruma, Barthélémy Boganda, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, Nelson Mandela, to cite just a handful of great African politicians (and I skip over other illustrious ones), have marked the contemporary history of Africa in a very positive way. It is however interesting to note that the new generation of Africans refer to most of these men as 'nationalists' rather than politicians—history perhaps preferring to give them a name a little less suspicious. There is nothing to be gained by lingering on the subject of perverted politics in Africa. There is an abundant range of literature available—from that which gives a wise analysis of the subject to that which is preoccupied with the details of the ruling powers. For a long time already most people have been aware that things aren't working as they should be. To be just in our judgement, let us say with the writer of Ecclesiastes (1:9) that there is nothing new under the sun. The post-colonial political history in Africa has reproduced only what was produced under other skies in other eras. The real centre of the problem is man himself.

At present, the continent of Africa holds the record for the highest number of refugees in the world. The notions of Human Rights have not been instilled in its mentality. Democracy is the catch word of all the political speeches. So let it be, but who can believe that a generation, which for a long time has been used to anti-democratic practices, either by political choice or by lack of visible democratic models, could be radically converted in the short space of an electoral campaign? Even if good men with high ideals for the political arena could be found, they are condemned to commit the sins of youth. Consequently, democracy in the full meaning of the word has not reached the African p. 357 continent as yet. The democratic state is yet to be constructed. Multipartyism is just the first step towards democracy. It is by practising democracy that democracy is established. Africa is living in a sort of political neurosis in the sense that many of its leaders are the incarnation of two diametrically opposed political stances.

While whole societies in Africa are being shaken by the winds of political change towards democracy, the evangelical churches on the continent are hardly even aware of changes. The church has been taught over a long period that politics is Satan's domain. Yes, certainly, some evangelical Christians have been involved in politics, but usually without the blessing of the church. As these Christian politicians have been reassured by

² The expression used by Achille Mbembe to denounce the limitations of the project to contextualize theology. According to him, the problems of contemporary Africa bring out new problems that cannot be understood by simply referring to the past. Cf *Afriques indociles—Christianisme, pouvoir et Etat en société postcoloniale*, (Karthala, Paris 1988), p. 12.

the popular acceptance of the new democracy, they have turned to the churches for counsel and direction. It is right at this point that the church has demonstrated that it is not equal to the challenge. It has almost nothing to say to its members because it hasn't prepared itself for such a situation. Almost without exception the evangelical churches in Africa have not known what role to play in the current political changes. This whole situation must change.

If politics is, in its most noble form, the way to conduct the affairs of State, theology must be interested in it. African churches have the responsibility to help politicians find the true meaning of politics. The city of God, it is true, is not of this world, but it is being built from within this world, otherwise the church has no reason to exist. Both the Old and the New Testaments affirm that political authority is instituted by God, with God himself being the source of the authority. With the church and the State both having their foundation in God, the separation of power between the two institutions must be seen as complementary, not as a divorce leaving two warring factions. Disdain of this reality has severely retarded political awareness among evangelical Christians. Instead of being content to set up emergency centres for the ever increasing number of refugees, the church should be intervening at the root of the problem. The statement of Jean-Marc Ela in this sense is correct: 'To help Africa come out of its global identity crisis where it is looking, on every level, for a new type of man and society, the Church must reflect on how to see the incarnation of the Gospel in all places where political orientations, economic plans, social and cultural affairs are being worked out for African Countries.'³ If the church resolves to get involved in this way, it will have done nothing contrary to its work of evangelization.

ECONOMIC QUESTIONS

In touching on the question of economics, we raise the question of development in general. Here above all, the diagnosis is most alarming. The problems are numerous. Without going into details let us make some observations which will show just how serious the problems are. **P. 358**

As Africa is generally non-industrialized, its economy is based on the agricultural and mining industries. Take for example a few products grown for export: cotton, coffee, cocoa, wood, meat, metals, precious stones and petrol. There is an enormous reservoir of primary materials, but most of the continent is desperately poverty-stricken with a very uncertain economic future. From the problems that confront Africa I will restrict myself to those that are tied to technology and the world markets. Because of the lack of suitable technology, Africa is unable to get the most out of its own products. The West is in no hurry to transfer its technology to Africa—and it seems that they are thinking even less of doing it at the moment. This is a strategy to maintain Africa in a state of economic dependence. Being under-equipped means that Africa cannot transform its products and resources at home. This situation does not encourage markets within Africa, a problem which is made even worse by the poor communication within the continent. The result is that Africa must export primary products.

The second barrier to development in Africa comes at this level. The buying prices for these African products are set by the buyers, not by the producers. We speak superficially of a 'world exchange rate'. Here is a blatant injustice, which has repercussions right down the line to the poor farmer, the one who sweats all day long in order to help others get rich. In a central African country, it has happened that the farmers have burnt their whole

³ Jean-Marc Ela: *Le cri de l'homme africain* (l'Harmattan, Paris 1980), p. 98.

cotton crop because the State could not afford to buy it. It was a whole year's work up in flames when it was the only source of revenue. How can we fight against such injustice on such a large scale? There is no other choice because there has to be foreign currency available. How can it be when you know that it comes in one door only to go out of the other in the form of repayments of debts?

In effect, African countries are collapsing under the weight of foreign debt repayments. From time to time they get a breath of fresh air when these debts are alleviated. What is the end result when we all know that the resulting economic growth will soon be swallowed up again by a new cycle of debts? Recently, with the devaluation of the West African Franc, the idea was that the affected countries would be able to increase their exports and thus attract more foreign investors. It is still early to make a judgement about this financial measure on the African economy but for the moment we are still a very long way from the miracle. How can Africa lift up its economic head? What message of faith and hope can the African church announce for the Africa of tomorrow.

The African church has integrated the concept of development into its activities for a number of decades, but it has no theology to orientate it in this realm. It leans on the definition given by the State. The definition is essentially along the line of the western idea of production-consumption, the human element appears only as a backdrop, a simple instrument. When the instrument can no longer produce, it becomes useless. All the problems [p. 359](#) of the unemployed and the outcasts of society are there to testify to it. Development which creates a dual speed society should not be encouraged. While on this subject, we could ask ourselves if the meeting of Africa and the West has always been a factor in development, or if sometimes it has led to under-development. The pre-colonial societies did not experience a massive poverty problem because production and consummation were not the determining factors in human relationships. The church must elaborate and practise a theology of development with mankind at the centre. This mankind must have the biblical perspective: that is, mankind with the dignity of having been created in the image of God. If it is mankind like this that becomes the end view of development, it will keep its intrinsic value, regardless of what it is, what it does and what it possesses. Such a vision of development would bring profound modifications to society. Only the church can promote the integral development of mankind. Only the church can teach and practise an ethic of work that conforms to the will of the Creator. Only the church can teach society to manage the environment in a responsible way.

For this to happen, the evangelical churches must stop considering the economic domain as a thing of the world to which the Christian must not pay attention. Doesn't God promise prosperity to his people in the promised land? Doesn't he promise blessing to the Children of Israel in the efforts of production? Did not Christ reply to his disciples who were worried about their social situation that any sacrifice made to follow him wasn't only to be rewarded in heaven but already 'even more in these times', before time in the future? ([Lk. 18:29](#)). African theologians must reassess teachings of missionaries on this subject and lead the churches into a more dynamic action in development.

While holding such a viewpoint, I must also confess my unbelief in the possibility of any real economic recovery in Africa. The economic struggle all over the world is so tough that the weaker nations have an ever-decreasing 'chance' of gaining a place. The world economic machinery is such an infernal steam roller that it must, at all costs, make a profit—even if some countries get crushed along the way. The Lord reassures us when he says that faith in him is able to move mountains. Strengthened by this promise, African Christians must hold onto hope for a better future but the condition is a resolute determination, with faith and hope, to get into the fight against under-development. The conflict between the 'social gospel' and the 'saving gospel' has gone on long enough. Who

was a better evangelist than Christ himself when he was here on earth? We do not find this dichotomy between body and soul in his earthly ministry. I want to make an appeal to western Christians; please join your faith to ours for action that will make for a better socio-economic context for Africans. What are the evangelical Christians in the affluent countries doing for their brothers and sisters in Africa: are they not pricked in their consciences about the way governments treat Africa? Can they [p. 360](#) not take some concrete action in their parliaments to review the North-South relationship and give it a more human face? May the evangelical Christians from the North and the South combine their efforts for a little more economic justice in Africa.

SOCIAL QUESTIONS

I will be very brief in this area, because when the economic questions are brought up the social questions are brought into focus at the same time. Among the numerous social problems I want to think mainly about health.

Most Africans recognize that they are alive by the grace of God, and not because they have access to good medical care. There is, in the medical area, a non-negotiable place for traditional medicine; but I won't take up that aspect here. I will limit myself to modern scientific medicine. Here are some of the crucial health problems in Africa: lack of equipment, high cost of medication, low ratio of medical personnel compared with the population. The continent has been sorely hit by the outbreak of AIDS. It is ravaging the younger generation. The recommended way to fight this disease brings out moral and spiritual problems. Let us be clear, the churches preach abstinence as they always have, but that seems a bit like trying to cut water with a knife. To be clear, the churches are rather perplexed in the whole situation, and their actions haven't yet had the desired effect. As if AIDS wasn't enough EBOLA fever has struck like lightning and sent the Zairian population into mourning. We haven't even begun to speak about the cholera epidemic that has ravaged thousands of Rwandan refugees, or meningitis which has on several occasions taken many victims in Central Africa—just to note a few examples of the region. Life is so precarious that any contagious disease soon takes on the proportions of an epidemic. What can we say about the thousands of babies who die each year from malaria? Churches and missions have a number of medical centres, even hospitals, on the continent but they often contain only African-style facilities. What can we do? How can the African church share its faith and hope with a population that is so vulnerable, whose life expectancy is so short in so many cases?

The medical work done by the churches is a living testimony to their faith. Their testimony touches other social areas such as education (by way of schools and literacy classes), rural development with micro projects in agriculture and animal husbandry. The churches, however, still need a theological foundation for these activities. Social work in the evangelical context has often been viewed as the lure for evangelization, criticized by some, embraced by others. That is why we need a theology of incarnation, in which Africans can rediscover Christ, the one who is, in reality, acquainted with their sufferings, and who can set them on a solid foundation of hope. It is regrettable that the churches' teaching about Christ puts the accent on his divinity without bringing out the fullness of his humanity. This is where the notable [p. 361](#) and guilty negligence of the physical stems from. The Christology of our churches is maniacal at this point. The churches must understand that social work is not the means of evangelism, or that evangelism is not over and above social work, but that social work is the outworking of evangelism. The gospel reaches man in his entire being.

CULTURAL QUESTIONS

Culture is a very sensitive issue in relationships between Africa and the West. This is the most traumatic of the issues between the two and the consequences are still visible today on all levels of society and in the churches. As well as the fight for political liberation for the people to govern themselves, the fight for liberty of spirit began early (c.f. the negritude movement). Considering the complex and vast nature of the subject I will limit myself to that which is particularly relevant to theology.

The gospel came to Africa in an envelope of western culture. This phenomenon in itself is normal, and an unjust case has been made against the first missionaries at this point. It is true that a lot of wrong things were done at the time and are condemned today with just reason. I want to make the point that the incarnation of the gospel in a culture—in this case the western culture—has a theological foundation. In the two Testaments, God reveals that he passes by man to speak to man. The incarnation of Christ is a great historical confirmation of this divine principle. However the problem begins when the amalgamation begins, and now there is confusion between the theological 'heritage of the universal church' and that of the 'particular churches of the West or the East'.⁴ Here we certainly need prudence but over and above any thought of political or nationalistic vindication, we must realize that African theology must be rewritten according to African realities. It is not a question of knowing if it is to be an evangelical theology, a neo-evangelical theology or a liberal theology; it is fundamentally a question of making theology relevant to Africans, and its effect on the way they express themselves and what they believe. For example, how do you translate certain theological concepts that come from Greek philosophy (nature, hypostatis) in an African language where such abstract forms are difficult to convey? Or how do you present Christ so that he is not just understood to be an ancestor? In Africa today, hardly anyone is talking about contextualization or inculturization, they are talking of a reconstruction of theology which will go much further than a simple cultural adaptation. Thus we are not just observing a shift in politics in African society but also a slow but sure shift in theology in the African churches. The task of [p.362](#) an evangelical theologian is just that much more delicate.

I cannot leave this topic without mentioning the burning cultural problem of the moment in Africa, an old problem, to be sure: tribalism. Evangelical theologians in Africa must seriously consider this problem in the light of the tragedy of Rwanda and Burundi. Both these countries have shown us to what extent of horror tribalism can lead. How can faith in Christ and hope in his return transform the mentality and actions in this area? In pre-colonial Africa there was talk of tribal warfare. Now after decades of Christianity, schooling, political and administrative organization, tribalism is still well and truly alive. In fact, in the church itself, tribalism manifests itself with as much vigour as in any other part of society. With just one blow, the church is powerless in the face of this cultural scourge. Tribalism is egoism to the nth degree, because it is based on the rejection, the refusal to accept any difference, the exclusion and intolerance of the other person—briefly, the exact opposite of love for your neighbour. There is no rational explanation, it is fundamentally unexplainable, just as any other form of racism, or simply sin. Tribalism is a violation of the divine law which says: 'You will not hate your brother with all your heart' ([Lev. 19:17](#)); and as such it is a sin. The African church has always been complacent

⁴ Achille Mbembe. He adds: 'In the eyes of intelligent African theologians, the particularity of western Christianity has ceased to be a reservoir of certainties to be drawn from indefinitely and serenely. Each expression of Christianity in the different regions of the world must confront the challenges that it meets in its own environment, and work at responding from a basis of a creative study of the traditions and paying attention to contemporary situations.' Op. cit. p. 50.

in face of the sin of tribalism, even in the most legalistic of churches. [Genesis 11](#) attributes the origin of tribes to God: he is the one who confused the languages of the people and spread them over the face of the earth, but nothing in the text establishes superiority of one group over the other or discriminates between them. It is with equal rights that each tribe takes possession of its portion and settles there. The African church must begin to react vigorously against tribalism, by developing a real and consequential teaching to combat this sinful scourge.

RELIGIOUS QUESTIONS

On the religious scene, I want to consider first three areas outside Christianity: traditional religions, Islam and the sects. These three blocks directly menace the existence of African churches at the end of the twentieth century and constitute, without doubt, a religious challenge to be taken up over a long period to come. The African church is experiencing sustained rapid growth. Observers are right when they say that the centre of Christianity has moved from the West towards Africa. The parable of the wheat and the tares ([Matt. 13:24-30](#)) draws our attention to the fact that today, even though the churches are multiplying, traditional religions are also developing even among intellectuals. Islam is fiercely eager to conquer and is gaining ground, sects (coming from the East as well as the West, along with syncretistic African movements) are gaining more and more followers. Some of these religions are even recruiting followers from within the churches.

Traditional African religions are a mixture of ritual practices which cover the whole gamut of human life. There are some aspects which [p. 363](#) are purely cultic (sacrifice, invoking and communion with spirits); some cultural aspects (sacred dances, initiation, which may include circumcision, excision, moral education, preparation for rites of passage), some socio-economic aspects (rituals for hunting or farming), etc. Therefore it is not abusing the term when we describe the African as an extremely religious person because religion penetrates every sphere of his life. Belief in the invisible (good and bad spirits, deceased ancestors, divinities) is expressed in almost every gesture in his life. This deep-rooted belief in the supernatural makes it difficult to know, for example, where the cultural ends and the religious begins, especially as it concerns the art forms (masks for example). Above all, this explains why the Christian religion is sometimes lived as an imported religion—that is, foreign to the ancestral traditions. Thus Christianity often resembles a graft which lives and nourishes itself from the ancestral root. This situation is the basis of the syncretistic movements.

As for Islam and the sects, I believe that their success in Africa is mainly explained by the fact that conversion of African animists to these religions implies a less radical rupture of the religious life than does conversion to Christianity. Elements of traditional religions (sacrifice and the importance of the rites) serve as launching pads for conversion to these new religions: whereas Christianity demands the abandonment of most of these practices to adhere to the Christian faith. This shows to what extent the traditional beliefs are rooted in the African peoples. It is into the life of these peoples that Christian faith and hope must burst in a radical and sovereign way. The error which must not be perpetuated is to minimize the importance of the ancestral beliefs and announce a 'ready-to-wear' (*prêt-à-porter*) gospel.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I will finish this presentation with three remarks to serve as a summary and conclusion.

1. I have wanted to convey in this article that theology must be elaborated according to a given theological milieu. In order to respond to the preoccupations of the African churches, theology must not continue to hover above the realities that confront it and remain simply an academic exercise. Certainly, we must not negate reflection, because it is essential to come to a correlation between good analysis and evoked questions on one hand and pertinent theological responses on the other. But reflection must be fed by actual real life situations. That means that the theologian is called to reflect on life's situations and try to relate revelation to history.

2. In the preceding pages I am less concerned about the theology and the theologian than I am with the church and the Christians. In effect, my hypothesis is that the church is the safe deposit for the Word of God. The church, not in the Catholic tradition where the stifling role of the Magisterium unduly restricts the universal priesthood, but the church as the body of Christ in all its diversity and all its richness. Thus defined, the church becomes p.364 the arena in which theology expresses itself. Evangelical theology in Africa wants to serve the church, in order to prevent the rupture of the two—as it is being observed today in the West. That is why I have constantly questioned the church, so that it will give itself a theology that will enable it to face adequately the challenges of Africa today and tomorrow. These challenges are summarized as the problems of surviving in this world, and the fundamental need of every human being—salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The theological work to be done in Africa is immense.

3. Faith and hope for the future is an invitation addressed to us to live today a Christian life which has consequences in the different domains of human existence. The political, socio-economic, cultural and religious situations that I have mentioned above are only examples. The question for us is to examine the quality of our Christian life today, to see if it can effectively influence the African societies of tomorrow. This current tension between the present and the future is able to create a dynamic of faith and hope which will bring real quality changes to the African churches.

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Theology for Asia

Ken Gnanakan

INTRODUCTION

Asia is in a crucial stage of its history. Economic prosperity is bringing rapid development. On the one hand, a growing middle class is wallowing in material prosperity, while on the other hand, the staggering population growth and ecological disasters demand our urgent attention in the face of the poverty which confronts us.

What is happening outside the church is not to be taken lightly. The church cannot remain content with its own numerical growth or stability, and continue in its familiar otherworldly attitude. A theology that addresses Asia today should take into account not only God's dealings with us as his people within the church, but also discern God's dealings with the world. Some of us are uncomfortable with the thought of God having to deal directly with the world and hence one must quickly add that God's dealing should be primarily through the church.

SOME HINDRANCES

There have been some hindrances that have affected our ability to totally relate our theology to the world around us. And before commencing a discussion of some of the theological perspectives, it is necessary to list a few. Overcoming these will enable us to be faithful to God's fullest concerns for his widest purposes for the world.

1. Other-worldly attitudes that have been handed down to us and which have blinded us to all that the Bible teaches us.
2. An excessive concern for evangelism and church growth in terms of numbers and statistics has only weakened the witness of the church in the wider sense. We have not explored all that the church should be in the world today.
3. Individual agendas have obstructed the collective mission of the church. Evangelicalism has been the breeding ground for such agendas. These have been manifested both in theological positions and in action programmes.
4. There is still a fixed idea of theology, as if it were universal in its [p.366](#) content and therefore universal in its relevance. There are, without any doubt, some distinctives that are universal, viz. salvation through Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection etc., but I am referring to the implications of these facts and the reality of the church within each varying context.
5. As a result of the above there has been a lack of concern for the total biblical perspective. We seem satisfied with the limited sections of the Bible from where we define our positions.

Merely by listing these issues, we see how limited we have been, and the burden of this paper is to explore what the Bible has to say for our situation today as we break from these restrictions. We will be freeing ourselves in order to make our theology truly actualized within our context.

THE ASIAN CONTEXT

But even before we attempt to identify some of the dominant theological themes, we need to attempt to define the situation that confronts us in Asia today. In a changing Asia, we need to discern some factors that may help us to know our peculiar context.

1. Asia has attained economic prosperity. Some countries have been rich for a long time, while others are still attempting to find their identity within their situation of wealth.
2. Yet a large area of Asia is still pressured by poverty. Some of these countries that are gradually approaching the status of being rich, like India, are facing greater challenges with the issue of the poor. But associated with this is the fact that the continent continues to cope with a massive population and all the problems linked with this.
3. Although there is a growing facade of secular modernity, even post-modernity, there is underneath a core of a religious people who still cling to traditional values. And this still conditions the culture. The young people face the problem of a sub-culture that is totally alien to this core cultural context.
4. An even more acute problem is that Asian culture is still conditioned by its millennia of rich historical diversity, in fact, a complexity. India, for instance, has had the influence of the Greeks, the Moghuls, the English etc., and it is hard to identify one single cultural strand. Cultural factors are complex.
5. Asia faces an ecological catastrophe. The recent global gatherings have proved only one thing—the rich North is still depending on the resources in the poorer South, and much of Asia is there. Whatever agreements are reached are one sided, heavily tending toward the older exploitation that will help sustain a particular lifestyle much in need of review within a changing environment. Unfortunately, as Asia gets richer, its people are aping this lifestyle and thereby [p.367](#) creating the rich-poor divide within.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

Our theological focus will therefore need to address these issues if we claim that our theology is at all relevant to our context.

1. For an effective theology, there should hardly be any doubt that the foremost need is for a sound and complete doctrine of God. This may sound presumptuous, or even passé, but needs to be stated. By complete I mean a doctrine that includes not only the transcendental understanding of God, as in Barth's theology, but also some very immanent and incarnational theologies that will make God accessible to and actualized within humanity.
2. Alongside this merging of the understanding of God's transcendental and immanent attributes, we need to see more serious consideration given to God's creational concerns alongside God's rederuptive activity for the world. Developing more boldly from God's creation is urgent if we are to reclaim our identity in a very real world within which 'we live and move and have our being'.
3. Alongside these concerns for a better understanding of God, we will need to place our trinitarian concerns. Our theology of the Trinity has thus far been heavily apologetic. Even if being apologetic has been a requisite, we have been fed with western approaches that argue our case for trinitarianism as purely factual rather than functional. In the religious framework that is peculiar to Asia, there are some religious facts which need not be argued. They need only to be stated. But having stated these, what is important is the function, implications and the outworkings

of these facts that need to be made known. The Trinity is key to the holding together of the present activity of the Holy Spirit along with the work of God and Jesus Christ of the biblical records. They work together and not separately.

4. A proper eschatological affirmation will be imperative. Once again our whole approach to eschatology has been very western with our students required only to affirm a particular position rather than to draw out implications for our immediate context. A totally futuristic eschatology with no present implications, of the kind that was encouraged alongside otherworldly attitudes, will not have any meaning within our context today. The new earth and new heaven must relate to the present earth, or else we will not be true to the biblical teaching of God's heart for his world today.

TWO MAJOR CHALLENGES

The context and the theological themes we have spelled out above will help in dealing with two major challenges that we confront in Asia, **p. 368** even worldwide. These are first, the communication of God's word within the plurality of religions and cultures that we confront today, and second the response to the environmental challenge within Asia. All else, i.e., poverty, religion, modernity, urbanization etc., are only factors that help us to understand these issues within our context.

Dr Ken Gnanakan is Executive Director of the Asia Theological Association, Bangalore, India. p. 369

Opening Address

Bong Rin Ro

It has been my privilege to work for the WEF Theological Commission (TC) since 1990 as its director, after serving the Asia Theological Association for 20 years. I have travelled to different countries to visit seminaries, met many theologians and attended theological consultations. For the past eight months I have been on my sabbatical leave from Korea to the United States, teaching module courses at five different theological seminaries.

The world and the church of the 21st century have many similarities with the world and the church of Martin Luther's time in the 16th century. Even in the theological field, the anthropocentric modern theological development with its emphasis on contextualization has become an increasing challenge to the evangelical church just as the Roman Catholic medieval theology of faith and reason and of superstitions became a stumbling block to Luther and other reformers. Therefore, just as Luther emphasized his doctrine of sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, and solus Christus to bring the erring church back to the biblical doctrines, we in our day need to go back to the Reformation faith from our theological confusion existing not only in the liberal camp but also in the evangelical community around the world.

I

THE WORLD OF MARTIN LUTHER AND TODAY

A. Materialism and secularism

The tremendous impact of modern materialism, especially in the consumer oriented capitalistic society, has captured the hearts of the people. As the increasing number of countries in Asia, particularly in the Pacific Rim nations, have been experiencing material prosperity for the last 20 years, many Asians are also deeply affected by materialism. In my own experience of travelling throughout Asia for the last 25 years for the ministry of theological education, I have seen the gradual changes in economic development in almost every country. Nevertheless, we still see millions of starving people in the Third World, and these poor people are also naturally [p. 370](#) inclined to regard material possessions as their goal.

Secularism on the other hand has gripped the minds of the people and changed their world view. Many sense no need of God's real intervention to establish peace for the world and believe that they can do it by themselves. The materialism and secularism of this world have greatly affected the Christian church and created many nominal Christians. Consequently, the moral decadence of our society even in Christian workers has weakened the witness of the church.

Martin Luther faced a similar situation in his time. The new discovery of America by Columbus (1492), Vasco Da Gama's trip to Cape Town, South Africa (1498) and to India (1499), the Portuguese discovery of Brazil (1500) and other explorations developed trade and caused the rise of western colonialism; consequently, modern capitalism was born. The late medieval Renaissance introduced humanism and the revival of Greek and Latin learning which contributed to the growth of scepticism and secularism. The Roman Catholic Church with its internal divisions, materialism and humanism, and moral corruption of the church leaders was in need of reformation. Martin Luther responded to that call of God.

B. The rise of other religions challenges the church

Both the Western and Eastern Byzantine Empires during the time of Luther were under the threat of the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Western powers confronted eastern religions through their exploration from the 16th century. Today, the Christian church is facing enormous challenges from the living religions of the world. Under the national government policy of the resurgence of traditional cultures the traditional religions have been reviving and have made their impact even on western nations.

Therefore, many liberal theologians have tried to accommodate these religions in our Christian thinking through religious dialogue and religious pluralism. Many contextual theologies have been introduced into the theological arena since 1970 and caused theological confusion at theological institutions throughout the world. More interestingly, in recent years some 'evangelicals' theologians have encouraged other evangelicals to be sympathetic towards other religions and to accommodate the teachings of other religions. Certainly, religious syncretism and pluralism would be the dominant theme of theological discussion in the 21st century.

C. Theological confusion in the church

Luther had theological problems in his time with the Roman Catholic church such as in the sale of indulgences, salvation, mariology, infallibility of the papacy, many forms of superstition, etc. He wanted to bring the erring Roman Catholic Church back to the

teachings of the Scripture. Today, we have our theological issues within the Christian church. **p. 371** With the emphasis on contextualization in theological studies in the post-colonial period, we have seen a list of contextual theologies in Asia, Africa, and South America which have brought theological confusion in the church.

Even among evangelical theologians there has been an increasing division on many of the theological issues especially related to evangelism and social responsibility, religious pluralism and other morally related subjects. The WEF TC has a God-given responsibility to deal with the pressing theological issues of our days and to provide the theological direction to the world-wide church.

II THEOLOGICAL AGENDA FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

I see four main areas of theological discussion that will take place and should take place in the next century, and I would like to see our TC devoting itself to dealing with these issues in the future.

A. The theology of religions

The uniqueness of Christ and the Bible in the midst of religious pluralism will be continuously challenged both inside and outside the church. Even some of the 'evangelical' theologians such as Clark Pinnock have challenged the traditional concept of the uniqueness of Christianity; therefore, the theology of religions will be the dominant theme of theological discussion in the 21st century.

B. Christian social responsibility

The theological issues of Christian social responsibility in the world of hunger, poverty, suffering, and injustice especially in the developing world have been extensively discussed for the last 25 years producing tons of materials. This theme will continue to be on the theological agenda of the 21st century, and TC ought to give a unified evangelical voice on important social issues of our days.

C. Moral issues in society

One area which the evangelical theologians have not adequately and cooperatively discussed has to do with controversial moral and ethical issues of our society today: abortion, homosexual marriage, AIDS, euthanasia, feminism, etc. The time has come for evangelical theologians around the world to have in-depth theological discussions on these topics in order that they might search the Scriptures once again and find out where they agree and disagree. Many Christians at the grass-roots level are theologically confused about their beliefs on these issues. I believe that the WEFTC must find out the evangelical consensus (common denominators' doctrines) on these controversial theological issues and help lay Christians with their beliefs.

D. Biblical concept of Christian ministry

Another crucial area in theological discussion is pastoral theology. Many pastors today are in crisis in terms of their relationship with the **p. 372** laity of the church. The average length of service which the pastor renders at one church in the United States is between four and five years. The rise of lay power in the church in the late 20th century has jeopardized the sanctity of Christian ministry. Therefore, the average lay person's respect for his pastor as an 'ordained servant of God' has been lost; in other words, the deep

respect and honour which the people of God in the Old Testament rendered to their priests and prophets and by which the early Christians in the New Testament time paid tribute to the apostles have disappeared; consequently, there is a crisis in Christian ministry today. We must recover the 'biblical concept of Christian ministry' from the Scripture. This is one of the tasks of the Theological Commission in the future.

CONCLUSION

We are living in the midst of materialism, secularism, humanism, pluralism, and theological confusion. There are amazing similarities of challenge to the Christian church during the time of Martin Luther and our time. As Luther wanted to recover biblical Christianity with sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, we also need to emphasize Luther's slogan for our days in order to go back to the biblical teaching for the problems which we face today. We have faith in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord; therefore, we have hope for eternal salvation and for the establishment of his kingdom in this world.

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Our Theological Task: Preparing for Mission in the 21st Century

Bruce J. Nicholls

As we prepare to enter the 21st century the present trend of world events suggests that we will face situations for good and evil whose magnitude will eclipse anything known in human history. The rapidity of cultural change, the expansion of human knowledge, economic development and prosperity, the development of the information highway and global travel are some of the positive benefits that await us. But alas, they will be matched by racial and communal violence, the widening of the gap between rich and poor, diseases with no known cure, the continuing breakdown of marriage and family life, amoral sexual behaviour and an expanding network of bribery, corruption and terrorism. In the midst of religious pluralism, secular humanism will give way to old and new forms of paganism in desperate attempts to save the world from ecological disaster. The conflict between the City of God and the City of Man so dramatically portrayed in the visions in the book of Revelation is becoming as relevant now as it will be in the last days.

We gather for this consultation in the faith and expectant hope that the Living Creator-Redeemer God of biblical revelation will triumph in the cosmic battle between good and evil. The victory won on the cross and demonstrated in the resurrection will be fully revealed when Christ returns to inaugurate the descent of the New Jerusalem ([Rev. 21](#)) and the creation of the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness ([2 Pet. 3:13](#)). God's kingly reign is now visible in his church in-so-far as the church lives under

the Lordship of Christ, the King. As evangelicals we believe in the church because it is born of God in Christ and is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. As the Body of Christ, the church is one, holy, apostolic and universal. It is the community of believers, justified by faith in Christ's atoning work on the cross, participating in Christ's resurrection from the dead and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Its authority is the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God, written.

As the people of God, we are ashamed of our disunity and our failure to stand together for holiness and purity in our worship and our daily living. We are guilty of theological apostasies and failure to take the gospel to our neighbour and to the peoples who have never clearly [p. 374](#) heard the gospel. Yet despite our failures, we rejoice to see God at work in new and unexpected ways. There are signs of church growth in many two-thirds world countries, new missionary movements with God-given vision, maturing leadership among church and laity, and countless men and women coming forward for theological training in residential schools and extension lay-training programmes. Above all we marvel at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in new and miraculous ways, the mañana vision of a new reality unlike today (Samuel Escobar).

It is upon Peter, the rock, his confession and all who follow his path, that Jesus promises to build his church and that the gates of Hell will never overcome it ([Matt. 16:18](#)). We echo Paul's benediction 'Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever! Amen' ([Eph. 3:20f](#)).

We have gathered here for this historic week to analyze in small groups the crucial theological issues of our time, bringing each under the penetrating light of Scripture, and to catch a vision of the needs of the whole world through our regional plenary presentations. At the same time we will declare our willingness to listen to each other and be open to the Spirit's guidance that together we may, with growing clarity, move towards a vital and coherent theology in order to meet the issues of our time, so that all things may be brought together under the Lordship of Christ ([Eph. 1:10](#)).

Our theological task is a hermeneutical one, in which we seek to distance ourselves from the Word of God, in our study of it, and yet fully identify with it and let it speak to us. At the same time we will analyze the plurality of our cultural contexts with all the sociological tools available to us, so that we might identify with our culture's hopes and fears and with those who are lost and without Christ.

Our task this week is to enter into a serious dialogue between this unchanging Word of God and the ever-changing context in order that we may discern God's word and priorities for our world. We do this by faith in Christ and the certain hope that he will triumph and establish his reign on earth.

We take up this task recognizing that it is a costly one. In submission to Christ and in recognition that together we constitute the body of Christ in this moment of time we declare our willingness to change or modify our theological perspectives and lifestyles where they are shown to be contrary to the fullness of Scriptural revelation. We will accept new responsibilities which seem good to the Holy Spirit and to us gathered here together. We recognize God's call to faithfulness in the exercise of the gifts given to each of us and we acknowledge our mutual accountability in the exercise of these gifts.

We rejoice that this is God's *kairos* time for us and we covenant together to be faithful stewards of this time and of our corporate knowledge and experience. [p. 375](#)

We join in praying together: 'Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'
So Lord by your grace help us to fulfil our calling.

In order to facilitate the process of the integration of our theological understanding, I suggest three loci for your consideration, drawing together some of the many insights and priorities given to us in the six plenary papers. From the papers given one thing is clear: the issues raised in regional contexts are in practice common to all the regions. Their specifics may differ from region to region but their universality gives us hope that we can work towards a coherent whole, for Christ is 'the same yesterday, today and forever'. The contextualizing of theology is the penultimate task, pointing to the unchanging gospel revealed in and through Jesus Christ, God incarnate.

I

The first focus of our theology is:

We affirm the triumph of the Creator-Redeemer God who speaks and acts for the salvation of all and for the re-creation of societies in which peace and justice reign.

We believe that the integration of all truth begins with understanding who God is, what he says and in knowing how he acts. We observe that all heresies begin with an imbalance of the biblical doctrine of God and with human speculation. Understanding and knowing God is the foundation of all our theologizing.

We affirm that God is eternally personal, acting through three centres of personhood revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is holy and just, loving and compassionate, and consistent in his moral acts. His knowledge and wisdom transcending all human understanding are hidden from us but revealed in Christ Jesus. Created in his image and likeness all humans, male and female, bear a unique relationship to the Creator not shared with the rest of God's creation. Contrary to New Age thinking, the Creator-God's relationship to human beings is not only unique but eternal. Those who reject God will suffer eternal separation from his presence.

God in Christ is uniquely the source of the life of the world. His incarnation was unique and unrepeatable. His saving death on the cross was a once-for-all saving act and his resurrection from the dead was God's justifying act and the beginning of a new humanity. In Christ's resurrection, heaven and earth became eternally one, a foretaste of the final integration of all things in Christ. Our faith is built on this hope. From my own cross-cultural missionary experience I have come to understand the uniqueness of this resurrection hope and to understand why it was so central to the sermons recorded in the Acts. In our secular and humanistic age people are turning in increasing numbers to eastern and pagan understanding of reincarnation. This is the abuse of divine law and is central in the immortalizing of the self. It is contrary to the new creation that Christ offers. It is a [p.376](#) denial of the Creator-Redeemer God.

God the Holy Spirit is the giver and sustainer of life. He convicts us of sin and judgement to come, reveals Christ to us, and leads us in the path of truth. He turns us from the way of idolatry, to the way of holiness and love. He transforms us into the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit is God's missionary enlightening the minds and quickening the conscience of people following other religious or secular paths. He prepares them to hear and receive the gospel when it is proclaimed to them. We grieve him when we refuse to follow Christ's call to take the gospel to all the world. We are missionaries only because the Holy Spirit, God's Sent-One, has gone ahead of us to the frontiers of human life and relationships. Further, it is the Holy Spirit who is the mediator of the Word of God, inspiring the biblical writers and illuminating our understanding so that the Word written is truly trustworthy and sufficient for our salvation. The Bible coheres because the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is its author.

It is the Holy Spirit who ensures the continuity of the message through all ages so that the creeds and confessions of the church universally point, however, imperfectly, to the faith delivered to the saints. We are not fundamentalists who reject all traditions and deny that God speaks or saves beyond the bounds of the visible church. We confess that the historic evangelical faith has been central to the church throughout its history. We welcome Thomas Oden's call to evangelicals to rediscover the texts, apologetic methods and pastoral wisdom of the patristic Fathers.

We affirm that it is the Holy Spirit that empowers God's people to be salt and light in corrupt societies and to transform every culture to the glory of God. We rejoice in every evidence of the Holy Spirit's supernatural power to reverse the process of decay and death, to give visions of Christ and his work to persons seeking him (as is evident in a majority of converts from Islam) and to cast out demonic spirits.

It has been a disappointment to me that only three of the participants of this consultation asked to join the working group 'Experiencing the convicting and transforming ministry of the Holy Spirit in a sinful and oppressed world'. Does this mean that evangelical theology is missing an essential component in the search for our integrated theology?

II

I suggest that the second focus of our integrated theology is:

Understanding and identifying with the contextual realism of the market place.

All too often evangelicals are quick to give theological answers to contextual and contemporary issues they barely understand. Our more liberal brethren often have a clearer grasp of the issues of our time while their theological responses may be inadequate. I have observed that evangelical movements are often 10–20 years behind those of the WCC ecumenical movement. A [p.377](#) classic example is in regard to apartheid in South Africa.

The dynamic centre of the 21st century will be the market place—that centre in every village, town and city where people meet to buy and sell, to exercise political, economic and racial power—the centre where world views and values are debated and where religions and ideologies battle for the souls of the people. The movement of the people to the cities for employment and pleasure, the growth of centres for education, medical and legal services, rapid industrialization and the control of the media are increasingly reflected in the growth of the market place. The development of the computerized information highway is going to change radically national cultures more quickly than any other factor in the whole of human history.

The market place is the arena of the future. It is the testing place for the gospel in the midst of the plurality of religions. It will change the shape of the church of tomorrow. The market place will be the nerve centre for every creative expression of the goodness of human nature and societal behaviour, but at the same time it will be the centre of the concentration of all the evils of society—violence, terrorism, poverty and disease, political and religious oppression, racism, sexual perversion, economic corruption and manipulation of the powerless. One third of the people living in the 4 main cities of India are now slum dwellers. The market places in rural Rwanda, in urban Bosnia, in the streets of Bangkok, in the inner cities of New York and Los Angeles are but examples of centres of enormous human suffering and the fear of death. Human failure in the Chernobyl melt-down has left 1/3 of the arable land of Belarus radioactive and uninhabitable for the next 25,000 years. What happens to its displaced population?

We need a living and integrated theology that prophetically speaks to the micro issues of personal sin and the macro issues of societal evil. It is significant that the two plenary presentations from the First World have given priority to personal evil and the four presentations from the Third World have given priority to the macro issues. The challenge before us is to hold together in creative tension these two horizons of mission. We will face this challenge in each of our smaller working groups.

Our theological task is to enter into dynamic interaction and dialogue between biblical revelation, theologically understood, and the cultural realism of the world's market place. This is more than just communicating the biblical message to the encultured world; it is incarnating the biblical Word in a fallen world. Jesus Christ's own incarnation is our supreme model, while the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament demonstrate what this can mean for us. We are called to the hermeneutical task of developing contextual theologies in which the unchanging biblical Word confronts the ever-changing market place with the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ and his gospel. Although many of the issues of today's market place did not exist in biblical times [p. 378](#) the message of the Good News is always relevant to every cultural context.

Our first task is to redeem from every culture that which is in harmony with God's self-revelation in nature, conscience and history. Culture is never neutral, because human behaviour is never neutral. We are committed to accept and change those elements of culture which are redeemable and can be transformed into conformity with the will of God. How rich and beautiful the market place can become where God's rule of peace and justice is actualized!

Our second task is to rebuke and destroy all manifestations of idolatry, immorality, oppression and demonic power that are contrary to God's revelation in Scripture. Our weapons are those of prophetic and moral rebuke rather than the power of mass protest so common today. All personal and social sin is anathema to a holy but loving God.

In every attempt to contextualize our theology the danger of synthesizing truth and untruth must be avoided. Truth and error, good and evil can never be harmonized. Syncretism is normative in the human religious search for meaning. It is normative to all forms of natural religions, be they Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Modernity or New Age movements. Syncretistic tendencies in the dialogue between the gospel and culture need to be evaluated and rejected. While every effort to contextualize the faith carries its own dangers, we must not turn back through fear. Clarity in our missiological goal and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit will keep us from falling. Paul's mission to the Gentile world is a working model for us to follow.

Our third task will be to bring the saving revelation in Christ to every culture, giving new meaning to the values of faith, hope and love, bringing a new depth of maturation into every act, revealing divine law and the grace to live victoriously. In the context of society, the church functions as salt and light. Where the church is faithful to this calling it is uniquely God's chosen agent to change and transform society, restrain evil, model the new society and to inspire hope and confidence in the future. Peace and joy are its characteristics, holiness and love its moral virtues. The renewal of the church is the prior task of God's people in every cultural context.

III

The third focus of our vital and coherent theology follows directly from the first two:

Word and deed demand an authentic and accountable life-style of the people of God, individually and in their communal life in the church.

A theology for the market place must be a theology lived out in the daily life of God's people. The constant theme of all of Scripture is that life, word and deed are inseparable. God's dealing with his covenant people Israel bears witness to this throughout Old Testament history. Jesus taught his disciples to pray—'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us'. From the gospel records to the Epistle of James, Scripture teaches that the proof that we love God is in our love [p. 379](#) for our neighbour. Liberation theologies have taught us the importance of 'doing theology' in context—though we deny that our theology begins with reflection on praxis.

The church is preeminently the place where this integration must be visible if we are to have a credible witness before a watching world. Jesus' own life style is our model. He 'went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every kind of disease and sickness' ([Matt. 9:35](#)). Jesus prepared himself for every crisis in his life with solitude and prayer. It ought to be no different with his disciples. A major factor in the spread of Islam across Asia was the life style of the Sufi holy men. No Christian minister can lead his congregation higher than he has gone himself. Successful warfare against principalities and powers demands putting on the whole armour of God, bearing the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, and continuing in prayer.

If we are going to develop the theology that is needed to take the church into the 21st century, we need to be obedient to the Holy Spirit's call for unity. The fragmentation and competition between evangelical leaders and their institutionalized agencies is a denial of the gospel they proclaim. Scripture warns us that a day of accountability is coming in which there will be no place to hide. Our very thoughts and motives will accuse us on that day when Jesus Christ returns as Judge and King. Let us pray for one another that we might have the same mind that Christ had as he prepared for the cross—the way of servanthood and of giving all glory to the Father.

Further, fresh initiatives in theological understanding call for better integration in our theological education, in the training of future pastors, missionaries and theological teachers. With worship symbolized by the chapel as the centre of all our learning let us work towards the integration of the chapel with the classroom and the library, with listening and participating in the fellowship of Christ's church, and with witnessing and serving in the market place, the symbol of the world. For example, we will understand the pain and humiliation of poverty only when we have shared our lives with the poor. The Holy Spirit may not call all God's servants to a ministry to the poor but he does call all to recognize that his gifting is plural and each partner needs the support of the others.

May the Lord unite us with one heart and voice enabling us to put ourselves under the authority of Christ and his word, so that we may be empowered by the Spirit to articulate a living theology for the market place of the 21st century.

In the words of the historian T.R. Glover, the early church 'out-thought, out-lived and out-died the pagan world'. This too is our theological task. [p. 380](#)

Recognizing God's Purpose for Gender Distinctives in Marriage and Family Life, Church and Society

WEF Theological Commission Working Group

This working group dealt with the theme of faith and hope for the future as it relates to the issue of gender distinctives.

1. WE IDENTIFIED THE FOLLOWING KEY CHALLENGES TO THE CHURCH AND THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT MOVING INTO A NEW MILLENNIUM:

1.1 With grief and empathy we recognize the tragic fact that gender distinctives often come to expression in the marginalization and oppression of women and girls in various and often shocking ways, and that such treatment, in the worst cases, is specifically because of their sex. Examples include female foeticide and infanticide, prostitution, rape, wife battery, incest, dispossession of widows, and severe psychological oppression. These injustices must be condemned and alleviated in the light of the biblical witness to the full human dignity of women and to their equality with men. There is both evidence and information relating to these issues of abuse, but by and large Christians are ignoring it. Evidence needs to be collated, and information disseminated, in a deliberate consciousness-raising strategy, and in a campaign as thorough as Wilberforce's to address the evils of slavery.

1.2 Women's and men's roles in societies the world over are changing rapidly in the face of socio-cultural, economic and political changes globally, and issues of gender identity and roles are being rethought in cultural debate. Fresh biblical and theological reflection on gender and gender distinctives is imperative in the light of this situation in order for the church not to lose capable, gifted and motivated women (or men) and so that it can best fulfil its task as the light of the world today rather than come to be judged as irrelevant or outmoded. The church should not merely reflect secular culture, or the cultural patterns of other religions, but neither should it lag behind where a society is pushing forward in right directions even if from secular convictions. We recognize that Christian understanding should not be driven by Western patterns, nor by those of radical feminists, for example, but by glad exploration of biblical teaching and illuminated application of it. [p. 381](#) We also recognize that gender roles may need to be expressed differently in different contexts; for example, what kind of models are possible and appropriate for Christian women in an Islamic society? Further, we recognize the need for fresh and incisive thinking about gender identity and roles for Christian men today, in a variety of cultural settings.

1.3 Women are already, and have long been, making significant contributions in the Christian church, and in the family. These contributions and the gifts from which they spring must be recognized and valued, given proper legitimation, encouraged and actively promoted for the sake of the body of Christ and the mission of the church to the world. Where there has been a conspiracy of silence, or a denial of the contribution and gifts of women, as, for example, in traditional church history texts, explicit corrections must be

made; in the light of these, it will be easier for Christian men and women to identify God-given possibilities for women in the present and the future.

1.4 Evangelical Christians are not in full agreement on questions of gender distinctives and on a Christian theology of gender. While recognizing the key role of Scripture for this issue, they disagree on the interpretation of the relevant biblical texts and their hermeneutical implications. Cultural differences can play a part in these disagreements. This impasse points to the need for more work on the problems of exegesis, hermeneutics, and the role of the reader's context in interpretation. Further, in addition to close study of specific texts, in the context of the testimony of the whole sweep of biblical material, we also wish to see a more thorough response to the charge that the Scriptures are themselves sexist, or that they are used to justify the oppression of women.

1.5 We note also the urgent need for careful and honest critical analysis of and response to the contributions of many feminist writers, especially those who raise legitimate questions but address them in an unbiblical manner. We grieve that in some cases the church has contributed to and exacerbated radical feminism by its failure to respond to justified criticism or to repent of sinful practices. At the same time, we have reservations about the goals of many feminists, and reaffirm that our goals must be defined in terms of the gospel. We confess that in some countries, evangelicals either dismiss more than they should or embrace more than they ought. We believe there is a special need to collate and analyze carefully feminist writings, and information about feminist agenda, in countries outside Europe and North America, and to make available to the world church the contextualized responses of male and female evangelical theologians working in the Two Thirds World.

1.6 We condemn sexism, misogyny and homophobia, and the toleration of such, wherever they occur: in attitudes and assumptions, views and trading, structures and actions, inside and outside the church. We believe that Christians are called to [p. 382](#) demonstrate 'a better way' of mutually respectful, affirming relationships, where men and women gladly serve each other and seek to do each other good. This living out of God's perfect design of harmonious and appreciative complementarity is to transform relationships in the family, in the church, and in society, and will in itself be a powerful testimony to the world of the gospel.

2. THE FOLLOWING APPROACHES AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES SERVE AS GROUNDS FOR FAITH AND HOPE IN ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES

2.1 When all the relevant biblical texts are taken into account, and we resist the impulse toward harmonization, we discover a diversity of perspectives on gender distinctives within the Bible, from subordinationist to nonhierarchical models for gender roles. These perspectives are not necessarily contradictory, rather they point to the multiplicity of cultural expression of Christian faith and the context-oriented character of the biblical teaching on gender.

2.2 God created man and woman distinct (male and female), yet without differentiation as concerns being created in the image of God, being given responsibility for creation, and having individual accountability to God. Woman and man were created as complementary to each other.

2.3 Christ redeemed woman and man from sin and its consequences experienced in gender roles in the fallen creation. In Christ, man and woman remain sexually distinct, yet now they also have a *common* identity: 'you are all one in Christ'. This new identity based on being in Christ affects the whole of Christian existence (not only the relationship to God but also to fellow human beings). Thus in the body of Christ there is a new equality and a new reciprocity of woman and man ([Gal. 3:28](#), [1 Cor. 11:11–12](#)). The outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh and the distribution of spiritual gifts without regard to gender at Pentecost and in the early church gives evidence of this new equality and reciprocity. The Spirit can and does empower men and women to new roles not based on gender but on spiritual gifts. Equality of status thus expresses itself in equality of function.

2.4 Jesus' relationship to women in the Gospels provides a Christian model for a new understanding of gender. Jesus resisted gender discrimination. He made women full members of God's family, treated them as persons and not as objects of potential male lust, did not hinder women from learning at his feet over against traditional role expectations, but welcomed them in the roles of disciples, and sent women as his witnesses to proclaim the good news of his resurrection.

2.5 The New Testament teaching on gender roles is characterized by both sensitivity and adaptation to the culture as well as by critique and transformation of the culture in the light of the new creation and in the power of the Spirit of Christ (for example, by affirming celibacy for those who have the gift and not making gender role necessarily p. 383 dependent on biological sexual identity).

2.6 A redeemed version of male headship not characterized by oppressive domination but by the sacrificial love of Christ is one biblical model for gender roles and relationships. Examples of nonhierarchical models of gender roles and relationships are also found in Scripture (for example, the early Christian teacher couple Priscilla and Aquila, or Paul's description of equal and mutual marriage relationships in [1 Corinthians 7](#)). Experience has taught us the immense danger of the abuse of male power, inherent in hierarchical models, due to human fallenness, a danger which is not inherent in nonhierarchical models of gender relationships. At the same time, we acknowledge that women, equally with men, are fallen, and that neither women nor men are exempt from the sinful desire to dominate others.

2.7 The apostle Paul appeals to the created order in support of non-hierarchical models of gender relationships ([1 Cor. 11:11–12](#)) as well as a Christologically-defined gender hierarchy. This invites us to look for models which incorporate the strengths of both.

2.8 In contrast with much current debate (which is often acrimonious and destructive) and much common practice (which may be deeply marred by sin), God's design for men and women in all their relationships, in marriage and family, church and society, is born of perfect grace and love. We are therefore entirely confident that humble, careful, prayerful biblical and theological study, mindful of our limitations but seeking together to hear and obey God, can be only for our good and his glory. Therefore, while we are soberly aware of the difficulties of our task, we nonetheless approach it in hope and faith, believing that to seek to confront sin and to foster righteousness is entirely in line with God's will.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 We urge each national evangelical fellowship to study and address gender issues, in the light of these theological perspectives, in ways appropriate to their context. This should embrace general gender roles and distinctives in marriage and family life, church and society, and may also include issues such as ordination, inclusive language, sexual orientation/homosexuality and lesbianism, representation and voice. In addition, national fellowships should address those issues of abuse specific to their context, for example from among those listed under 1.1 above.

3.2 We recommend further theological and biblical reflection on gender issues by evangelical men and women. The lack of adequate theological resources has limited those working against abuses and exploitation of females. The theological and biblical task should be undertaken jointly by men and women, rather than only by men, or only by women.

3.3 We recommend that WEF facilitate and finance exchange of [p. 384](#) research and publications on gender issues in various countries.

3.4 We recommend that WEF offer scholarships for women to engage in theological study and to participate in conferences so that women's contributions are integrated into the mainstream of theological work.

3.5 We recommend the formation of a task force on women and gender by the WEF Theological Commission to work on issues raised here and other related to them.

The Working Group included the following:

Rev Khaled Boushra (Egypt) (p.t.); Rosemary Dowsett (Scotland); Dr Judith Gundry-Volf (Germany/ USA); Margaret Jacobs (Australia); Rev Joe Kapolyo (Zambia); Leela Manasseh (India); Rev Nikolay Nedelchev (Bulgaria) (p.t.), Beulah Wood (New Zealand/India); Dr Isaac Zokoué (Central African Republic) (p.t.).

The Working Group warmly invites response and contributions from readers of this document. In the first instance, this should be addressed to: Mrs Rosemary Dowsett, OMF International, 4 Borden Road, Glasgow G13 1QX, SCOTLAND, UK (Fax 0141 959 4976). We would gladly receive material pertinent to monographs and study guides addressed to specific issues raised above, or to assist in the preparation of a textbook on gender issues suitable for international use. [p. 385](#)

Proclaiming Jesus Christ as the One Universal Saviour and Lord in a World of Religious and Secular Pluralism

WEF Theological Commission Working Group

PLURALISM: BOTH FRIEND AND FOE

Pluralism is a fact of life at the end of the 20th century which has both positive and negative implications for the proclamation of Jesus Christ as uniquely the Saviour and Lord of all. Evangelicals support and benefit from situations where there is respect for a plurality of perspectives. We are committed to the right of others to believe and worship freely and we ask for that right for ourselves. This sort of tolerance and respect is a healthy form of pluralism. In some situations, however, the tolerance of differences is based on a relativistic approach to truth and knowledge, which either denies the existence of absolute and exclusive truth or insists that knowledge of such truth is impossible.

As we move toward the 21st century, evangelicals increasingly find themselves in one of two situations that have adverse effects for the proclamation of Jesus. There are still many places where religious freedom is granted in principle but not in practice, either because of the dominance of an oppressive religious majority, or because of an anti-religious secular philosophy. On the other hand, in parts of the world which are most tolerant of religious differences, there is a growing resistance to groups which make exclusive claims to truth, as evangelicals do. The proclamation of Jesus as *unique* Saviour and Lord is perceived as an unacceptable intolerance of the convictions of others.

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOUR AND LORD

Although evangelicals defend the right of others to practise their own religious convictions, we are committed to truths which necessarily exclude the validity of other beliefs and practices. God has made himself known to us through his action in history, the meaning of which he has revealed in the Bible. The Bible is thus our sole authority for faith and practice and is the arbiter of all claims to truth and morality. It is on the basis of this biblical revelation that we assert that there is only one true and living God, who exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In his uniqueness, God, who **P. 386** revealed himself supremely in Jesus Christ, is Lord of all other beings, who depend upon him for their very existence.

Humankind was created by God and for fellowship with him, but now lives in fallenness and alienation from God because of sin. To reconcile sinners to himself, the Word of God became a man in Jesus of Nazareth, who lived a perfect human life and died an innocent death. Through his resurrection, he overcame the power of death and sin and opened the way for the reconciliation of sinners to God, so that God might be just and yet justify sinners. All those who truly believe in Jesus as Saviour and who bow to his Lordship are accepted by God as his children. Those who hear and understand the proclamation of Jesus, but who refuse to believe and submit to him, remain under condemnation by their own choice, though God continues to be patient and gracious toward them until the end of their lives when their final response is irrevocable.

There is not a consensus among evangelicals regarding the possibility of salvation by grace, through faith, of those who are incapable of explicit faith in Christ, whether because of a physical incapacity or because of a lack of knowledge. This is an aspect of evangelical theology which is currently receiving intense discussion. From all perspectives in the discussion, however, there is a strong commitment to the importance of the universal proclamation of Jesus Christ as the normal means by which God brings people to salvation. This is one of the essential ministries which God has given to the church.

THE PROCLAMATION OF JESUS CHRIST

The proclamation of Jesus Christ is done both verbally and in deeds which require interpretation for their meaning to be evident. In its verbal proclamation, the church calls

all people to repent of their sin (against God, against other human beings, and against God's creation), to cast themselves upon God's mercy, to trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and to submit themselves to him as their Lord. Christians also proclaim Jesus Christ by the symbols of Christian worship, by their lives of Christian faithfulness, and by their deeds of compassion and acts in pursuit of justice for others. As the grace of God is at work in the community of his people, the church becomes a sign of the kingdom and manifests the nature of life in that kingdom, in imperfect but attractive ways.

Having experienced the saving power of God, Christians are called to proclaim his Lordship in private and public worship. Every aspect of their lives, personal and social, must be submitted to Christ. Within the context of the plurality of religions, the identity of Jesus as Lord must be clearly proclaimed. (For example, within Islamic contexts, it must be stressed that Jesus is God and not merely a prophet. Within Hindu contexts, his uniqueness as God is the point needing emphasis.) In every situation, the forms of idolatry, religious and secular must be exposed. In this way, the implications of the Lordship of Jesus will be [p. 387](#) made clear in the face of other entities that compete for the allegiance of human lives.

Given the plurality of religious and cultural contexts in the world, proclaiming Jesus, in a manner that genuinely brings people into a meeting with him, is a complex and difficult task. The situation of hearers of this proclamation must be carefully assessed and those who proclaim Jesus must discover how to communicate effectively the truth of God within the context of the hearers. In this difficult task, we find hope in the promise of Christ to be present with those who carry his name to the ends of the earth, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit who illumines both those who proclaim and those who hear.

In seeking to contextualize the proclamation of Jesus, we must be careful that the Christ we proclaim is the one whom the apostles proclaimed in their preaching and in their writings, as uniquely Saviour and Lord. People must be called to be disciples of Jesus Christ with lives of personal holiness and social righteousness. In every situation, there are risks that the identity of Jesus and the claims of his Lordship will be subtly modified to make the message more acceptable and the life of discipleship more easy. Here evangelicals outside the context may play a role that is helpfully critical, but this requires much sensitivity when their understanding of the context is minimal. The task requires constant attention to both the voice of God in Scripture and the dynamics of the situation in which God is calling people to himself.

EVANGELICAL PROCLAMATION AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER DENOMINATIONS AND RELIGIONS

The proclamation of Jesus is a duty accepted by all Christian churches. What this means is not always understood in the same way. Christians should seek to cooperate wherever possible with others who share their commitment to Jesus as uniquely Saviour and Lord of all. In such cooperative mission efforts, evangelicals must ensure that the gospel which is proclaimed is uncompromisingly the biblical good news.

It is essential that we understand the position of those among whom we proclaim Jesus Christ. Dialogue with representatives of other Christian groups or with other religions may be a helpful process to further mutual understanding. Such dialogue is always conducted, however, within the context of the church's evangelistic mission. Listening must precede but may not substitute for proclamation.

Sadly, serious, and often violent, religious conflict is a feature of our times. Evangelicals, while holding fast to the uniqueness of Jesus as Saviour and the universality of his claim as Lord, must do so in evident humility. It is Jesus Christ who is supreme and

we are simply his followers. We, of all people, should be most conscious of God's grace toward us and must shun all expressions of pride or superiority. In relationship to other Christian groups, this should lead to a non-sectarian attitude. When persecuted for their [p. 388](#) faith, Christians should follow their Lord in the way of the cross, in a spirit of forgiveness and love. This too is a way of proclaiming Jesus, the one who suffered and called us to suffer with him in order that we might also share the joy of his final victory.