

Theme:
Church and Theology

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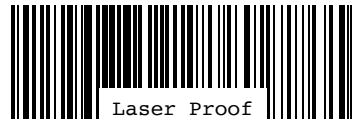
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Editorial

With this issue we mark the commencement of our 26th volume. This journal was established twenty five years ago as a strategic project of the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission (TC). So we are pleased to present as our opening article a review of the history of the Commission by its founder and driving force for many years, Dr Bruce J. Nicholls, of New Zealand. He was also the long-time editor of this journal, and we believe his reflections and insights on the work of the Commission will be informative and interesting for our readers. This paper, based on an oral presentation made at a recent Theological Commission consultation, covers mainly Dr Nicholls' own period of leadership, and suggests the value of a full scale history of the Commission. (The first 24 volumes of this journal and many other Commission publications referred to by Dr Nicholls are now available on CD, details of which are mentioned elsewhere in this issue.)

With this focus on the work of the Commission, we are similarly pleased to publish Dr David Hilborn's perceptive analysis of the process of collaborative theological work being practised by the UK Evangelical Alliance theological commission, known as ACUTE, which he serves as advisor. Drawing inspiration as it does from the work of the WEF TC, this work provides an attractive model for theological groups around the world.

In this issue we also present two fur-

ther papers presented at the WEF General Assembly and TC Consultation in Kuala Lumpur, May 2001. Both take the focus from theological work to the church—in an interesting extension to the article in our last issue on Pentecostalism and Apostolicity, Amos Yong discusses the application of the 'marks of the church' in a Pentecostal setting, while Miroslav Volf's Bible study is a powerful summary of key features of our understanding of the nature and mission of the church. Dr Volf's recent book, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* is also reviewed in this issue.

Finally, we present the concluding part of Bob Robinson's detailed study of the uniqueness of Christ, (see our last issue, October 2001 for Part 1). This underlines the importance of Christology and soteriology in the pluralistic context of Christian life and mission today when there are significant changes taking place in the church in every part of the world—both internally in its nature and identity, and externally in its work and witness. We take seriously the parabolic imagery of our Lord emphasizing growth and development. So we accept innovation and change as part of the life of the church, but recognize that there needs to be the solid anchor of Christology and clear theological reflection about the steps being taken. This issue provides help with this process.

David Parker, Editor.

The WEF Theological Commission 1969-1986: A ministry on the frontiers of global evangelical Christianity

Bruce Nicholls

Keywords: Evangelical awakening, Lausanne movement, theological education, accreditation, publication, research, dialogue, social responsibility, gospel and culture

The World Evangelical Fellowship¹ is a global movement of evangelicals committed to cross-cultural unity and fellowship, the defence and confirmation of the gospel, and the furtherance of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Early in the nineteenth century the political and industrial upheavals in Europe and North America, the impact of liberal theol-

ogy of the Enlightenment era beginning with Immanuel Kant (which Karl Barth characterised as 'A system founded upon the presuppositions of faith in the omnipotence of human ability') brought evangelicals together at a global level. The renaissance within the Roman Catholic Church and the emergence of a high church Anglo-catholic movement at Oxford added to the sense of urgency. The expansion of western colonialism opened up new opportunities for Christian mission, which called for united action.

Dr Bruce J. Nicholls is the founder of this journal and served as its editor for more than fifteen years. He was educated at the University of Auckland and London Bible College, and holds an MTh degree (Princeton Theological Seminary) and D.D. (Ashland Theological Seminary). After serving as missionary in India for 39 years, he has retired to his home country of New Zealand, where he is active in numerous theological and church ministries, and is editing a major commentary series being prepared by Asian scholars. This paper details his work as the founder of WEF Theological Commission and is based on a presentation made to the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission Consultation on Ecclesiology, Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia, 1-4 May 2001.

¹ For the history of the World Evangelical Fellowship, see David M. Howard, *The Dream That Would Not Die: the birth and growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship 1846–1986* (Paternoster, 1986); W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: the story of the World Evangelical Fellowship* (Paternoster/Baker, 1996)

I The Evangelical Awakening

After a series of small meetings on both sides of the Atlantic, 915 leaders from 52 denominations in 11 countries gathered in London in August 1846 and formed the Evangelical Alliance. Those present met 'not to create Christian union but to confess the unity which the church of Christ possessed as His body'. A statement of faith was adopted. Plans for co-operation in global mission were defined. The first ecumenical movement of modern times was born.

The history of the next hundred years was one of expansion and recession. National Evangelical Alliances were formed across Europe and in North America bringing evangelicals and their churches together. At the same time sharp division over the rights and wrongs of slavery divided Europe from North America. The establishing of the week of prayer, generally in January, became a common feature of the movement. Many national and international conferences were sponsored. However, periods of recession and decline followed, especially early in the twentieth century with the impact of liberal theology and again between the two world wars.

After World War II the evangelical movement world-wide began to experience theological and spiritual renewal. The revitalising of the western global missionary movement reached its peak in the early 1960s. This point also marked the beginning of cross-cultural indigenous missionary movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Today their numbers

are greater than those from the western world. There are now more than 6,000 Korean cross-cultural missionaries and the target of their churches is to cross the 10,000 mark within the next decade.

In the wake of the new concern for world evangelisation, serious reflection began to take place on what it means to be an evangelical. The National Association of Evangelicals in USA was formed in Chicago in 1943. The Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Studies was formed in Cambridge, England in 1944.

The need for united action was urgent. As a result of these many initiatives some 91 delegates from 21 countries gathered at Woudschoten, Holland, in August 1951 and established the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) as a global administrative body to provide 'the umbrella that national fellowships have lacked for over a century'. The World Evangelical Alliance, which was based in Britain, became the World Evangelical Fellowship. Since then Evangelical Fellowships have mushroomed throughout the world.

The Evangelical Fellowship of India was formed in Akola, Central India in 1951 and the Theological Commission of EFI formed at Yeotmal, where I was teaching in 1962. I was the first organising secretary. Today, National Alliances and Fellowships function in 110 countries with several regional Fellowships. In 1967, a WEF office was set up in Lausanne, Switzerland but has since moved depending on the location of the General Secretary/Director. The Rev Dr Jun Vencer, who was the

General Director of WEF for the last 10 years, based his office in Singapore though he himself operated from Manila.

The need to strengthen the theological base of the WEF in order to speak biblically to changing theological issues and to strengthen the growing number of theological institutions in Asia, Africa and Latin America was still to be recognised. It was not until the 5th General Assembly of WEF at Lausanne in May 1969 that a theological co-ordinator was appointed. Having addressed the Assembly on the need for a united response to the growing number of theological issues of the time, I was invited to become the honorary part-time theological co-ordinator. At that time I was serving as a missionary in India with the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship (now Interserve) and teaching at the Union Biblical Seminary, Yeotmal, Central India in the departments of Bible and theology.

Parallel to the development of the WEF but not independent of it, Billy Graham, the successful crusade evangelist, called for a World Congress on Evangelism. This took place in West Berlin in 1966. It was sponsored as the 10th anniversary project of the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* whose founding editor, Carl F.H. Henry, was the Congress chairman. The huge Time Clock in the conference foyer ticked away the numbers who died throughout the world without Christ during the period of the congress. I well remember the long queue of third world delegates in one of the semi-

nars waiting to respond to the agonising issue of the destiny of the millions of people who have never heard the gospel. The call of Carl Henry that 'every evangelist must be a theologian and every theologian an evangelist' challenged all of us deeply.

Following the congress, regional and national conferences were held in Nairobi for East Africa, Singapore for Asia-South Pacific and in Bogota, Colombia, for Latin America. These took place in 1968. Others were to follow. The Berlin Congress and these regional conferences prepared the way for an even greater global conference on evangelism in late December 1973—early January 1974—the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland. Nearly 3,000 delegates from 150 nations took part. The Indian delegation numbered 90. In his opening welcome to the delegates, Billy Graham, the honorary chairman, said, 'We have heard the uncertain voices of modern theologies that speak of a dead God and point us to the wandering stars of moral relativism, linguistic analysts who shred the biblical faith, and religious syncretists who take Christ from his solitary throne and deny his uniqueness and place him in the pantheon of popular deities. We gather in Lausanne to let the earth hear his voice.'² These were strong words indeed. Waldron Scott, the then General Secretary of WEF, fol-

² Douglas, J.D. (ed.), *Let the Earth hear his Voice* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), p. 16.

lowed with an address on *The Task Before Us* in which he surveyed the growth of Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America concluding with the words, 'For every person in the world today who professes the name of Jesus, there are two who have never heard his name.'³

Perhaps the most enduring fruit of this consultation was the Lausanne Covenant of which John Stott was the chief architect. The next year the Lausanne executive committee appointed a number of working groups including the Theology and Education group with John Stott as chairman. In the same year the WEF Theological Commission was inaugurated in London. My overwhelming concern was that these two theological bodies begin working together. The overlap of persons involved has been high. Six of the ten original members of the Lausanne Theology and Education working group were also members of the WEF Theological Commission. My continuing disappointment is that these two evangelical theological groups continue as separate entities. As evangelicals, the baseline of our unity, fellowship and mission in the world is theological. We stand or fall on our understanding of the gospel and obedience to its message. We must manifest our unity to the wider church and to the world.

Thus being part of the WEF Theological Commission was an awesome responsibility. At the Wheaton '83 conference I felt the call of God to leave my global administrative

responsibility and devote the rest of my missionary career to the needs of the church in India. Thus in 1986 I retired to become pastor of a local Indian congregation in a town in north India of perhaps two or three hundred thousand people. There were only two churches in the town, one Protestant—the United Church of North India of which I was the pastor, and the other a Roman Catholic church. Those last six years were the most satisfying of my career. I have become a committed churchman. The motto of the Lausanne movement, 'the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world', is a challenge to us all.

II Form follows Function: The Theological Assistance Programme 1969-1975

After my appointment as the theological co-ordinator of WEF and my return to India from post-graduate research in London, I launched the Theological Assistance Programme (TAP). Its purpose was to encourage the development of national theological commissions and societies and the development of regional associations, to offer them consultative help through lecture tours, seminars, workshops and consultations. TAP's function was also to strengthen theological education throughout the third world, with scholarships for graduate training of faculty and support for library development. During the next five years TAP became a catalyst in developing Theological Education by Extension (TEE) projects and accrediting associations in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and in

³ *Let the Earth hear his Voice*, p. 21.

Europe.

The dictum of the renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, 'form follows function', became the dictum of TAP. I wrote, 'The church is more than an organisation; it is a living organism whose head is Jesus Christ and whose life is visibly manifest in local churches, individually and collectively. In summary, the church functions as worshipping, witnessing and serving communities.'⁴ TAP sought to apply this principle to theological education. With this dictum in mind, TAP kept a low-key structure.

The first step was to recruit competent staff. In the goodness of God, WEF was led to appoint John E Langlois, a bilingual lawyer in the Channel Island of Guernsey, as TAP international administrator and treasurer. John was recommended to me by the Rev Gilbert Kirby, the Principal of the London Bible College and General Secretary of WEF. We met at the London Bible College where John was completing his studies. In the founding of TAP, John was God's gift to WEF. I was the visionary and John the efficient administrator. John and I shared together in several tours; the most notable was our visit to South Africa. In 1980 John became the International Treasurer for WEF, a position he still holds. He initiated the founding of the Religious Liberty Commission at the ninth General Assembly of WEF in Manila in 1992. John was appointed Chairman. He is active in

local politics and is also a member of the Guernsey parliament.

Patricia Harrison of Australia was the third member of TAP staff. She was appointed as Secretary for Education. She pioneered the development of TEE in several countries and lectured extensively in Asia and Africa during 1980-1981. She launched the journal *Theological Education Today* which she edited until she was granted leave of absence to pursue her doctoral studies. Her commitment to WEF and to excellence in theological education was exemplary. In her place, Dr Lois McKinney of Wheaton College became the editor of *Theological Education Today* for a short period until she moved on to other responsibilities.

At the Theological Commission meeting in Stuttgart June 1979, Dr Robert Youngblood was appointed as Associate Administrator/Secretary, to be located in New Delhi, India. In October 1980 he relocated to Holland where he shared an office with the Netherlands Evangelical Alliance. He was seconded to the Theological Commission by the missions department of the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). Robert made an important contribution to the developing of theological excellence, particularly in the realm of accreditation. He and Dr Paul Bowers were the founders of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies (ICAA) as an arm of the Theological Commission. Later ICAA established its own identity as a separate commission. (It is now known as International Council for Evangel-

⁴ Bruce Nicholls, *Theological News* 2:2 (April 1971), p. 1.

ical Theological Education or ICETE.) Personally, I regret that this separation took place, as theology and theological education are two sides of the same coin; each needs the other.

The need for supporting administrative staff soon became evident. In 1974 I moved from the Union Biblical Seminary, Yeotmal, to New Delhi where I was the founding Director of the Theological Research and Communication Institute, and from this centre I continued my ministry with the WEF. Through the vision and support of Mr Arthur Pont, the UK director of the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship (now Interserve), I was ably helped by a succession of secretaries seconded by BMMF. The first was Miss Liz Brattle from Australia, then Mr David Muir from the UK and later Mr Lionel Holmes also from the UK. They all carried heavy responsibilities in administration and in helping me with the editing and publishing of *Theological News* and later the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT).

III From TAP-Asia to the Asia Theological Association (ATA)

The early development of TAP was inspired by recommendations that came from the Asia-Pacific Congress held in Singapore in 1968 as the Asian follow up of the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation. Chua Wee Hian, a participant representing the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IEFS), wrote, 'Theology has never been the forte of the Asian Church. So it is not

at all surprising that it occupied very little prominence at the Congress. Asian pastors and laymen conveniently classify theology as an academic matter and rarely relate it to their evangelism.'⁵ Dr Jong Sung Rhee of Korea warned that the dangers of theological dilution, including universalism, liberalism and syncretism, would blunt the cutting edge of evangelism. Dr Rhee stated, 'The theological student with all his knowledge of Barth, Bultmann, Niebuhr and Tillich is often hopelessly unable to share the revealed truth of the Word with his congregation.'

At the Congress, a small core of theologians met several times and requested Dr Saphir Athyal, vice-principal of the Union Biblical Seminary in India, to give leadership to the establishing of Theological Commissions in countries where there were none. There was also encouragement to sponsor national conferences during 1969-1970 with the possibility of a small all-Asian conference late 1970 or early 1971. Dr Athyal followed this up by visiting several theological schools in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, Hong Kong and Thailand. In a remarkable way, this small group of theologians and the TAP co-ordinators came together to plan the Singapore Conference. The vision came from the Asian theologians and the structure came from the TAP of WEF. This historic meeting, held 5-7 July 1970, brought together 51 evangelical leaders from

⁵ Chua Wee Hian, *Theological News* 1:1 (May 1969), p. 3.

South and South-East Asia, New Guinea and Australasia. A commission of nine members and four consultants began planning for an Asian Centre for Advanced Theological Studies. Another commission of seven members was appointed to survey curriculum and accrediting needs in theological education. Proposals were developed to expand TEE's cooperation with the American group, Committee to Assist Ministry Education Overseas (CAMEO). CAMEO had planned TEE workshops in four countries in Asia and four in Africa for later in 1970. At this historic meeting in Singapore, TAP-Asia was born. A further conference was planned for June 1971 in Singapore. In preparation, John Langlois, the TAP Administrator, spent October 1970 to March 1971 firstly in India with me and secondly in Singapore with Dr Bong Ro at the Discipleship Training Centre.

At this second consultation attended by 23 delegates and 12 observers, TAP-Asia was established as an autonomous fellowship with its own executive committee and regional coordinators. Dr Athyal continued as General Coordinator, Dr Eui Wham Kim was appointed coordinator for North East Asia, Dr Bong Rin Ro for South East Asia and Dr G.J. McArthur for the South Pacific. In addition, functional coordinators were appointed for Evangelical Theological Societies and Commissions, for Bible Teaching Ministries and for TEE. TAP-Asia voted to become a member of TAP-International but retain its autonomous status.

At the consultation, the commis-

sions on Assistance for Theological Education, The Centre for Advanced Theological Education and TEE began planning their programmes. A workshop on 'Programmed Instruction' led by Peter Savage of South America followed immediately on from the consultation. The Centre for Advanced Studies met in Seoul, April 1972. 'Programming and Extension' workshops were held in many countries. *Programming News* was launched. Nené Ramientos launched 'Christ: The Only Way' movement in the Philippines. The Evangelical Fellowship of India established its Theological Society in 1972. The Association For Theological Extension Education in India (TAFTEE) was established with teaching centres in several key cities. Dr Athyal went on a lecture tour to Latin America while I visited many colleges in Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Dr Bong Ro, the TAP-Asia administrator, visited 19 theological colleges in the Philippines. John Langlois, the TAP administrator, visited eight countries in Africa.

This was a *kairos* time of enormous significance. Research centres were developed in Seoul and in India. The latter, established in New Delhi in 1974, was known as the Theological Research and Communication Institute (TRACI). The Asian Centre for Theological Studies and Mission was opened in Seoul in the same year.

Patricia Harrison became the TEE Coordinator and travelled widely throughout Asia, and Bong Ro began publishing a newsletter. This amazing momentum across Asia

between 1970 and 1975 also saw the founding of several new theological schools at the BTh and BD (M Div) levels and the explosion of TEE throughout the region.

The need to evaluate standards now became an urgent issue. In December 1973, TAP-Asia sponsored four consultations in Hong Kong, bringing together those concerned with contextualization, TEE, accreditation, and research centres. Over 30 papers were read and discussed over eight days. A new constitution was drafted for TAP-Asia and its name changed to the Asia Theological Association (ATA). ATA decided to maintain a fraternal link with TAP, but membership in TAP-International was dropped. ATA had come of age. Dr Bong Ro became the Executive Secretary of ATA. These developments made clear that the TAP of WEF should not become a global organization with branches in different continents but rather function as an information and service agency to work with autonomous theological associations in each region. Once again function determined the form.

IV Parallel Developments in Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean

While these developments were taking place in Asia, parallel movements were developing across Africa and the Caribbean. In March 1969, the Association Theologica Evangelica was initiated, bringing together evangelical theologians in Latin America in the form of a theological society. This new movement was lat-

er known as the Latin American Theological Fraternity (LATF). It focused on creative theological thinking in the Latin American context and establishing standards equivalent to those at a university level. It began publishing in Spanish *Pensamiento Cristiano*. The early leaders include Plutarco Bonilla, Rector of the Latin American Seminary at Costa Rica, Andrew Kirk of the Evangelical Faculty at Buenos Aires (Argentina), René Padilla (also of Buenos Aires), Samuel Escobar and Pedro Arana of Peru, Emilio Antonio Nunes of Guatemala and Robinson Cavacanti of Brazil. While several of these and others became involved in the Theological Commission of WEF, LATF vigorously guarded its autonomy and thus the relationship with the WEF was a fraternal non-structured one. Ross Kinsler of Guatemala had pioneered TEE in the early 1960s. By 1969, 25 seminaries in Latin America and the Caribbean were using extension methods and programme texts.

In the same manner, TAP developed a fraternal relationship with similar structures in Africa. Dennis Clark, the international secretary of WEF, visited a number of theological centres in Africa early in 1969 and reported that evangelical textbooks for both French and English speaking Africa were a priority. As the TAP coordinator, I attended the General Assembly of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM) in February 1973 and assisted in the formation of their Theological Commission. It was agreed to establish two new semi-

naries at the graduate/BD/MDiv-level (one for English speaking Africa and the other for French speaking). Eventually this led to the founding of the Bangui Evangelical Theological Seminary in the Central Africa Republic and to the founding of the Nairobi Evangelical School of Theology in Kenya. It was my privilege along with other members of our staff to visit both these centres in their formative period.

The Theological Commission of AEAM met in Limuru, Kenya in January 1974 and focused on leadership training. It was led by Dr Byang Kato, a Nigerian now based in Nairobi. Byang became the first chairman of the WEF Theological Commission. I again visited Kenya in November 1975 to participate in the meetings of the Theological Commission of AEAM in Nairobi. Later in 1981, John Langlois and I visited South Africa and met with the Association of Evangelicals of South Africa in Johannesburg. I visited several theological schools and John Langlois visited Transkei.

Similar events were taking place in the Caribbean. John Langlois made several visits to the Caribbean and represented the WEF in the forming of the Association of Evangelicals of the Caribbean and in the development of graduate level theological education in Kingston, Jamaica, under the direction of Zenas Gerig.

V TAP Becomes the Theological Commission of WEF

By 1974 the staff of TAP had developed a network of relationships

throughout the Third World. The time had come to strengthen the structure to ensure the effectiveness of the on-going function of its ministry. At the sixth general Assembly of WEF at Chateau D'Oex in Switzerland in July 1974, a Theological Commission of 12 members was formed. Dr Byang Kato was appointed as Chairman and Dr Arthur Climenhaga vice-chairman. The first meeting was held in London 8-12 September 1975. It was agreed that the name TAP should be dropped and that the WEF Theological Commission should become its official designation. Staff portfolios were designated and plans made to extend the commission to between 20 and 30 members with an executive committee representing each region to meet annually.

The Theological Commission was blessed with outstanding chairmen: Dr Byang Kato, Dr Climenhaga, Bishop David Gitari of Kenya and, from 1986, Dr Peter Kusmic of Croatia, and now Dr Rolf Hille of Germany. The strength of the Theological Commission was in the annual meeting of the executive of 6-7 members and the senior staff. It was a time when the Executive examined the accountability of the staff, not always a comfortable experience for us! The past and present were evaluated and plans clarified for the future. The dictum 'function determines structure' was always under review.

The London meeting decided to expand the Commission to 25-30 members to give adequate representation to all the regions and to reflect

the wide spectrum of expertise and of churchmanship. The London consultation identified areas of contemporary theological debate and surveyed areas where theological education needed strengthening. Special attention was given to research centres and to accreditation. Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl was invited to edit the monograph series and I was invited to launch the proposed *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

After the meetings, Dr Byang Kato and I attended the WCC General Assembly at Nairobi November 1975 as associates, together with Professor Peter Beyerhaus of Tübingen. We were given permission to have daily sessions for evangelicals present in order to evaluate the progress of the General Assembly. We were able to influence some of the decisions made in the working groups, especially the one on syncretism. A week later Byang was tragically drowned at Mombasa, Kenya. Africa had lost a fearless theologian, pastor and preacher, and the Theological Commission had lost its dynamic first chairman. I had lost a close friend. Byang had been secretary of the AEAM since 1972. It was a moment of great sorrow for us all.

Members of the Theological Commission staff were encouraged to use their own creative gifting in specialist ministries. David Muir initiated the Research Information Bank whose goal was to build up a bank of current research projects being undertaken and to make details known to our constituency. Current research projects were regularly listed in *Theolog-*

ical News from April 1975. David Muir also went on to produce a 40-lesson programmed text entitled *An Introduction to New Testament Greek*.

At a later stage, Dr Jorgen Glenthoj of Denmark and our staff member, Robert Youngblood, prepared a multi-language WEF *Hymnal* which was released at the General Assembly in 1986. My own ministry included entering into dialogue with wider and often less sympathetic bodies. In addition to the WCC General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975, I represented the Theological Commission at the WCC in Canberra in 1992. I also took part in several ecumenical consultations, the most notable being that of 'Dialogue in Community' in Chiang Mai April 1977. My own contribution in the form of a Bible study was severely criticised by most of the delegates present, but as a member of the Drafting Committee I helped to produce a statement on religious syncretism which was one of the more evangelical statements coming from the WCC.

I was also engaged in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and visited the Vatican twice. In India I was engaged in serious dialogue conferences with Muslim leaders, Sikhs and Hindus. The ability to dialogue with people of other Faiths and with ecumenical Christians was a gift from God, sometimes misunderstood by fellow evangelicals. Dr Paul Schrottenboer, the General Secretary of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, convened the Theological Commission project on the Roman Catholic

Church. He was especially gifted in this ministry. A special task force set up at the Theological Commission meetings in Holland in 1980 was commissioned to prepare a statement on Roman Catholic theology and practice. The 40-page document, *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism*, was presented to the WEF General Assembly in 1986 and received their approval. It is reproduced in ERT October 1986 and January 1987.

At the Theological Commission meetings in Manila, 1992, the study unit on Ecumenical Issues under the convenorship of Dr Paul Schrotenboer was commissioned to enter into a dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church on Scripture and tradition. (Other developments in this work will be mentioned below.)

VI An Expanding Publication Programme—From TAP to the Theological Commission

WEF Theological News

A second development in TAP and the Theological Commission was the development of a wide-ranging publication programme. In May 1969, one year after my appointment, I launched *Theological News*. As an eight-page quarterly newsletter, *Theological News* focused on sharing information on theological issues and news of developments in theological institutions and associations throughout the world, but primarily in the developing world of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. I continued editing *Theo-*

logical News until my retirement from WEF in 1986—a total of 69 issues! A year later John Langlois launched *Programming News*, later called *Programming*, to provide information on the development of study materials for Theological Education by Extension. Later Patricia Harrison incorporated *Programming* into *Theological Education Today*, which she edited.

Monographs

The next development took place in 1978 when Dr Klaus Bockmuehl of Switzerland and later of Regent College, Vancouver, was appointed the editor of a series of theological monographs known as *Outreach and Identity: Evangelical Theological Monographs*. During the next seven years Klaus published five monographs by leading evangelical scholars on subjects including Karl Barth's theology of mission; the biblical doctrine of regeneration; contextualisation: a theology of gospel and culture; Evangelicals and social action; pornography: a Christian critique, and Theology and the Third World church. The series was published by Paternoster Press and IVP USA. The monograph on Contextualisation, published in 1977, was later republished in Korean and Portuguese. After Dr Bockmuehl's untimely death in 1989, Dr Bong Rin Ro took up the editorship and published six additional titles. (These and other WEF TC publications are now available on the *WEF Theological Resource Library* CD ROM).

Evangelical Review of Theology

A major development in the Theo-

logical Commission's publication programme was the launching of the *Evangelical Review of Theology* (ERT). At the 6th General Assembly of WEF at Chateau d'Oex, Switzerland in July 1974, Rev John Stott recommended that a digest of international evangelical theology be published on a regular basis. The Theological Commission as TAP became took up the challenge and I launched the first issue of 175 pages in October 1977. It contained original articles and reprints from other publications divided into six sections—Faith and Church, Theology and Culture, Mission and Evangelism, Ethics and Society, Pastoral Ministry and Theological Education. The masthead describing ERT stated, 'A digest of articles and book reviews selected from publications world-wide for an international readership, interpreting the Christian Faith for contemporary living.' This purpose of ERT remained constant throughout my period of editorship, though separate sections were not retained.

In July 1986 my successor, Dr Sunand Sumithra, became editor and then three years later, Dr Bong Rin Ro took over the role as part of his responsibility as WEF TC Executive Director. In January 1990 I was again asked to take up the editorship, which I did from 1991 to 1998 when Dr David Parker of Brisbane, Australia, became editor. I would like to acknowledge the faithful, patient and professional support of Jeremy Mudditt, the then publisher for Paternoster Press, who has published and distributed ERT on behalf

of the WEF from the second issue. I also wish to express my grateful thanks to my wife Kathleen who has proofread and assisted me in the editing of every issue of *Theological News*, ERT and the several books of the Theological Commission.

Theological Books, Study Units and Consultations

Since 1976 the Theological Commission has been involved in publishing a wide range of theological books:

Church and Nationhood, edited by Lionel Holmes and published in New Delhi in 1978, sold for US\$1.50! This book contained papers presented at the Theological Commission's consultation held at St Chrischona, Basel, Switzerland, September 1976 on the relationship of the Church and State. It dealt with issues of emerging nationalism, Christians living under hostile governments, and issues raised by capitalism and Marxism.

The Theological Commission was responsible for the three volumes that came from the Wheaton '83 consultation on 'The Nature and Mission of the Church', though only *The Church: God's Agent for Change*, edited by Bruce Nicholls, was directly published by the WEF. In eight sections, it included major articles followed by case studies illustrating the themes presented. Unfortunately, stocks of this important publication were lost in a disastrous fire at Paternoster's premises and it was never reprinted. The other volumes from the consultation were *The Church in New Frontiers in Mission*, edited by Patrick Sookhdeo,

and *The Church in Response to Human Need*, edited by Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden. *The Unique Christ in our Pluralist World*, edited by Bruce Nicholls, was published in 1994. It included papers on the same theme given at the Theological Commission's consultation in Manila 1992.

The Faith and Church Study Unit first met at Tyndale House Cambridge in 1982 and on four subsequent occasions under the competent editorship of Dr Don Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield USA. The Faith and Church Study Unit published five volumes through Paternoster Press UK and Baker Book House USA, namely: *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*; *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study*; *Teach us to Pray: Prayer in the Bible and the World*; *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*; *Worship: Adoration and Action*.

The Ecumenical Issues Study Unit published two volumes. *A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism* was commissioned by the WEF and presented to the WEF General Assembly in Singapore 1986 for approval. *Evangelical Response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was first published in 1992. This was a response to the WCC's study project 'Towards a Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith'. Both volumes were edited by Dr Paul Schrottenboer, the convenor of the Study Unit.

The Ecumenical Issues Study Unit was commissioned by the Theologi-

cal Commission to undertake a special study on 'Scripture and Tradition' with reference to its biblical foundations and as understood in the wider church—ecumenical, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. The eight papers were published in one volume, *ERT* 19:2 (April 1995).

Having clarified its own evangelical understanding of Scripture and tradition, the Ecumenical Issues Study Unit entered the next stage of direct dialogue with Roman Catholic theologians, nominated by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This took place in Venice, October 1993. Four papers, together with three additional papers, are printed in *ERT* 21:2 (April 1997).

The next dialogue between the Study Unit and Roman Catholic theologians took place at Tantur, Jerusalem, October 1997 on the theme 'Church and Mission'. The papers are printed in the *ERT* 23:1 (January 1999). After Dr Paul Schrottenboer's death 16 July 1998, Dr George Vandervelde took over convenorship of the Ecumenical Issues Study Unit.

The Theological Commission's Ethics and Society Study Unit sponsored a consultation on 'Sharing Good News with the Poor' in New Delhi, October 1993 which brought together biblical studies, theological reflection and outreach ministry on the subject. The book published by this title, and edited by Bruce Nicholls and Beulah Wood, was released by Paternoster Press and Baker Book House in 1996.

The Theological Commission also published a number of titles jointly

with the Theology and Education Group of the LCWE. These volumes included *In Word and Deed: Evangelism and Social Responsibility* edited by Bruce Nicholls. These were papers given at the joint consultation on this theme at Grand Rapids, USA in 1982.

In the volume, *God the Evangelist: How the Holy Spirit Works in Bringing Men and Women to Faith*, Dr David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary USA gave his own interpretation of a jointly sponsored conference on the 'Work of the Holy Spirit and Evangelisation' held May 1985 in Oslo, Norway, while *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* was Dr Wells' understanding of issues at the consultation on 'Christian Conversion' held in January 1998 in Hong Kong (also jointly sponsored by the WEF and LCWE). I look forward to further cooperation between WEF and LCWE in our theological task of mission and evangelisation.

The Theological Commission sponsored a series of six consultations at High Leigh, near London, England in March 1980 (immediately prior to the 7th General Assembly of WEF). Two of the consultations were jointly sponsored by the Theological Commission and the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, namely 'Simple Lifestyle' and 'Reaching Muslims'. Ronald Sider edited the first volume, *Lifestyle in the '80s: An Evangelical Commitment to Simple Lifestyle*. Because of the sensitive nature of Muslim evangelism no

report was published from the second consultation. Rather it was seen as a preparation for the COWE consultation in Thailand scheduled for June 1980. Ronald Sider also edited the volume arising from the third consultation 'The Theology of Development in the 1980s', published as *Evangelicals and Development: Towards a Theology of Social Change*.

Of the other three consultations, the most significant was the one on 'The International Community of Accrediting Associations' convened by Dr. Paul Bowers, the Theological Commission's Liaison Secretary for Accrediting Associations. Representatives of accrediting agencies from Asia, Africa, North America, the Caribbean and Europe meeting at High Leigh made the important decision to form an International Council of Accrediting Agencies for evangelical theological education (ICAA). It was agreed that the council would operate with internal autonomy under the sponsorship of the Theological Commission of WEF.

One of my disappointments was the controversy over the publication of *Transformation*. This new journal on social ethics was to be sponsored by the Ethics and Society Study Unit of the Theological Commission and to be edited jointly by Tokunboh Adeyemo (the General Secretary of the AEAM), Ronald Sider and Vinay Samuel. Its purpose was to give a biblical response to the social and ethical issues confronting the contemporary church and to call for creative action. The first issue was released January 1984. Howev-

er, the WEF Executive Council, meeting the next year in Hilversum, Netherlands, while recognizing 'its valid and needed service' feared that that the controversial nature of some of the issues raised and the views of some of the contributors might be divisive to the WEF as a whole. They requested the Theological Commission to 'make arrangements for its continuing publication as an independent journal'. The Theological Commission reluctantly accepted this decision. It was a serious blow to those evangelicals deeply concerned with social and ethical issues. For the work of the Ethics and Society Study Unit, it marked the beginning of their movement away from the Theological Commission and their ultimate collapse. *Transformation* has continued to make a vital contribution as an evangelical witness in the wider ecumenical context. It is now identified with the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

A publication programme of a different nature was the launching of the Biblical Library Fund which offered basic evangelical exegetical works to Roman Catholic and Orthodox Seminaries in the Third World. The Library included the Tyndale commentaries, the *New Bible Dictionary* and the *New Bible Commentary*, Harrison's *Introduction to the Old Testament* and Guthrie's *Introduction to the New Testament*. Within a year David Muir had sent out sets to nine seminaries. It was later extended to include evangelical seminaries in Africa.

VII Consultations: The Building Blocks of Evangelical Cooperation

Over the years the Theological Commission has developed several distinctive functions while forming a unified whole. These are:

1. To build relationships between theologians and their theological institutions across cultural divides and entering into dialogue with people of other theological persuasions, churchmanship and people of other faiths.

2. To defend and promote the historic evangelical Faith with deep conviction but with unconditional love.

3. To rightly interpret the gospel in the plurality of global cultures.

4. To promote victorious living in the market places of society.

5. To strive for understanding of and obedience to the totality of Christ's mission in the world in terms of evangelism, the training and care of believers, compassionate service to the poor and oppressed, justice in society and the responsible stewardship of creation.

6. To strive for excellence in theological education, creativity and relevance in the theological training of the whole church, ordained and lay.

7. To encourage the whole church to communicate the whole gospel to the whole world through God-given teaching, preaching and writing and the use of audio-visual media and electronic technology.

One of the ways to implement these functions has been the effective use of small seminars and workshops, although not neglecting larger national, regional and internation-

al conferences and consultations. In some of these gatherings our Study Units have been the convenors. In others there has been joint sponsorship with other evangelical bodies, while in others we have in participated as members of the wider evangelical community. The Theological Commission has endeavoured to keep a low key profile, seeking only the glory of God.

Some of the conferences that have been highlights in my own pilgrimage and ministry have been the following:

1. The Berlin Congress on Evangelism (1966)

2. The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation (LCWE) (1974)

3. The 5th Assembly of WEF in Lausanne (1969)

4. The founding of TAP-Asia (1970, 1971) and later ATA (1974)

5. The 'Church and Nationhood' conference in Switzerland (1976)

6. The 'Gospel and Culture' consultation in Bermuda, and the Willobank Report (1978), which was sponsored by LCWE but in which Theological Commission members were deeply involved.

7. The multiple Theological Commission conferences at High Leigh near London (1980)

8. The LCWE conference at Pattaya (1980).

9. The consultation on 'The Relationship of Evangelism and Social Responsibility', Grand Rapids (1982)

10. The Third World Theological consultation sponsored by ATA, Seoul (1982)

11. The Wheaton conference on the 'Nature and Mission of the Church' (1983) (this was the high point in my conference ministry)

12. The pastors' retreat in Cairo led by David Howard, Ron Sider and Bruce Nicholls.

13. The Manila conference on 'The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ' (1984)

14. The Oslo conference on 'The Holy Spirit and Evangelisation' (1985)

15. Theological Commission consultation on 'Jesus Christ: Our Liberator and Redeemer' in Singapore (1986)

16. The Hong Kong consultation on 'Conversion' (1986)

17. The consultation on 'The Stewardship of the Environment' at Marcelona, Michigan USA (1992)

18. The consultation on 'Sharing Good News with the Poor' in New Delhi (1993)

VIII Reflecting on Lessons Learned

As I reflect on the history of TAP and the Theological Commission over the years in which I was involved (1969-1980s), I want to make a number of observations and comments on lessons learned which may be of value and encouragement to those now providing the on-going leadership.

1. It is essential that the leadership has a global vision of the importance of theology and theological education in the growth and nurture of evangelical churches and their agencies. But it is equally important to plan to act nationally and regionally.

It is not a question of either globalisation or cultural contextualisation—it is holding both poles together. Admittedly this is a difficult task.

2. The Theological Commission must be a prophetic voice to the churches and to society, courageously pushing the frontiers of biblical understanding and interpretation and speaking with boldness to the escalating social and ethical issues of our time. At the same time the Theological Commission must take a servant role in the life of the national Alliances and Fellowships of the WEF and in the work of the national and regional Theological Commissions and Associations, some of whom function outside the national Fellowships. The prophetic voice is a spokesman for God yet one that is sensitive to the concerns and priorities of people and always acting with compassion.

3. A central issue of the Theological Commission has been the relationship of the gospel to culture. The question of identity is a global issue in our post-modern age but even more so in the developing world where the clash of traditional and modern cultures is acute. The relationship of identity in Christ and an identity in one's national culture is an on-going struggle. The Achilles heel of evangelical Christianity is the danger of fragmentation. Empire building and personal cultism destroy our diversity in unity. Our Theological Commission has not been without its divisive influences. We must live with this tension, faithfully proclaiming the gospel but with sensitivity to cultural values.

4. If function is to determine form then the Theological Commission staff and its members must give priority to relationships, first with God, then with their families, then with each other and always with our constituency. There is no substitute for the staff constantly being on the road, meeting theologians, visiting theological schools, attending conferences, ever listening and being sensitive to people's responses. Building a global network of relationships takes time and it takes people committed to this function. In my own case it meant travelling three to four months a year. A small team of senior staff, each with distinctive gifts and ministries, trusting each other in load-sharing, counselling one another where necessary, is the key to success. I suggest a minimum staff of three and a maximum of five. Every visionary leader needs a good administrator and this I had in John Langlois.

5. Staff accountability is crucial to success. As staff we have sought to be accountable to the Theological Commission Executive. In turn the Executive is accountable to the WEF International Council, to the National Alliances and Fellowships and to the national and regional Theological Associations. This tension in accountability is always with us. It is a sign of strength, not necessarily weakness. In my time, the key to the growth of the Theological Commission was the staff accountability to the Theological Commission Executive, whose seven members met every year with the staff for consultation and evaluation. Between

1975 and 1986 we never missed an annual meeting.

6. Building up a large commission of 45 members was only partially successful. It was difficult to mobilise such a large and diverse group to accept a Theological Commission identity and to motivate them to action. This model has now been dropped. A more successful model has been our small study units of 5-7 members. In my term the most successful have been 'Faith and Church' convened by Don Carson, 'Ethics and Society' convened by Ron Sider and Chris Sugden, 'Theological Education' convened by Patricia Harrison and Robert Youngblood, and 'Eccumenical Issues' convened by Paul Schrottenboer and George Vandervelde.

7. Excellence in theological education has always been a priority of the Theological Commission. We have been a catalyst and in some cases a pioneer in extension education, in developing accrediting associations, in library development, curriculum development and scholarships for faculty training. However, theological education is more than building institutions. It begins with good theology which is biblically grounded, contextually relevant and pastorally orientated. Theological education is more than teaching subjects; it is shaping men and women to know God and to go out to make him known in the world. Men and women need to be trained to be good counsellors, to have a missiological vision and to be accountable to their sponsors. There can be no dichotomy between theological conviction

and ministerial formation. Spiritual formation is fundamental to theological excellence.

8. Financial sustainability is crucial to our task. I believe that if we have the right vision, the right leaders and adequate finance there is no limit to what we can achieve. Donors give according to their confidence in the leadership and the regular accountability of finance received. In the case of the Theological Commission, virtually all our funding came from England, Holland and Germany. To our unnamed donors we owe a great debt of gratitude. Times are changing. The financial load needs to be spread. New resources, especially in Asia, need to be found. I thank God that new organisations have arisen that do better than we were doing. For example, while we gave away \$40-50,000 a year in scholarships for faculty training, the Overseas Council International now is able to invest millions of dollars each year in theological education. We thank God for this development.

9. Investing in people pays eternal dividends. The Theological Commission has been blessed with outstanding leaders who have contributed generously to the movement and who have now moved on to other responsibilities. Our chairman for six years, David Gitari, is now the Archbishop of Kenya. Michael Nazir Ali of Pakistan, a member of the Theological Commission Executive, is now the Bishop of Rochester, England. Robinson Cavacanti is now Bishop of Recife, Brazil. Saphir Athyal, the pioneer of ATA, became the Principal of the Union Biblical

Seminary, Pune, and later a vice-president of World Vision. Bong Ro gave outstanding leadership to ATA for 20 years and is now president of a college in Hawaii. Wilson Chow is an acknowledged statesman of the Chinese world. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden lead a worldwide ministry in mission theology. Tokunboh Adeyemo, Tite Tienou and René Daidanso are acknowledged leaders in Africa. Peter Kusmic, chairman of the TC for nine years, is the recognized statesman of Eastern Europe. Our present Chairman Rolf Hille, director of the Albrecht Bengel Haus in Tübingen, is one of the most influential evangelical theologians in Europe today. Others have made outstanding contributions through their writings. To mention a few—Don Carson, Ron Sider, Christopher Wright, Dick France, Klaus Bock-

muehl, Klaas Runia, Henri Blocher, Miriam Adeney, René Padilla, Antonia Nunez, Andrew Kirk, Valdir Steuernagel—all have been active in the Theological Commission.

10. Last but not least the apostle Paul's example of endurance in running the race and not turning back has characterised the leadership of the Theological Commission. We thank God for their faithful persistence through success and failure. Some have finished their race; others are still pressing on. The stability of the Theological Commission depends on stable continuity and constant input of new people and with new vision.

The words of the prophet Micah (6:8) have long been my guide: 'And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God'.

FIRESTORM OF THE LORD

Stuart Piggin

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Truth, Collegiality and Consensus: The Dynamics of an Evangelical Theological Commission

David Hilborn

Keywords: Evangelicalism, truth, unity, diversity, dialogue, tradition, hell, annihilationism, conditionalism, methodology, collaboration

Introduction

Since its inauguration in 1974-5, the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission (TC) has achieved much in the areas of research, consultation, advocacy and publication. The extent and value of its work are well attested in the two key histories of WEF written by David Howard and Howard Fuller.¹ In this paper, I shall reflect on how the founding principles of the Theo-

logical Commission, as defined by Bruce Nicholls, John Langlois, Byang Kato and their colleagues 27 years ago,² have found expression at the national level in the United Kingdom, through the recent formation and development of ACUTE—the UK Alliance's Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals.

Specifically, the following study has two aspects. First, from my position as Theological Adviser to the UK Alliance and Co-ordinator of

Dr David Hilborn is Theological Adviser to the Evangelical Alliance UK and Coordinator of ACUTE (The Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals). He read English at Nottingham University and Theology at Mansfield College, Oxford, where his doctoral thesis was on the language of worship. He is a minister of the United Reformed Church and previously ministered with his wife Mia at the City Temple, London. His book, *Picking Up the Pieces: Can Evangelicals Adapt to Contemporary Culture?*, was published in November 1997. This paper was presented to the World Evangelical Fellowship Theological Commission Consultation on Ecclesiology, Kuala Lumpur, West Malaysia, 1-4 May 2001.

¹ David M. Howard, *The Dream that Would Not Die: The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1846-1986*, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1986), Chs. 20-21; W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: The History of the World Evangelical Fellowship*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), Ch. 10.

² Bruce Nicholls was the first Coordinator of the WEF Theological Commission, John Langlois its first Administrator, and Byang Kato its first Chairman. Nicholls and Langlois had been active for a number of years previously in WEF's Theological Assistance Programme (TAP), which transmuted in 1974-5 into the Theological Commission.

ACUTE, I shall recount the genesis, *raison d'être* and growth of the UK Commission, as well as outlining its strategy for the future. In doing so, I trust that helpful lessons will emerge for both the WEF Theological Commission and for other national theological bodies. Secondly, I shall address core issues of theological methodology and hermeneutics which arise from seeking to do evangelical theology on the 'commission' model—that is, in a self-consciously collegial and consensual milieu. I do not pretend that every aspect of our experience in Britain is transferable to other cultural settings, or to the global pan-Evangelical context. Nor do I suppose that the epistemology which I take to be implicit in ACUTE's work will meet with universal assent. Overall, however, I do believe that ACUTE's decidedly collaborative *modus operandi* offers salutary challenges and opportunities—not least in relation to the prevailing individualism and compartmentalisation of western academic theology.

ACUTE's Genesis and *Raison d'être*

In late 1992, the then General Director of the Evangelical Alliance UK, Clive Calver, paid a visit to Jerusalem. Under Calver's leadership, the Alliance had grown phenomenally in the previous decade, from a little-known association of a few thousand members, to a mass movement which could plausibly claim to represent a million Christians in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Alliance

had co-sponsored what was now the largest Christian festival in Europe, Spring Harvest; its media profile had risen year on year; it had successfully brokered Billy Graham's Mission England campaign, and had earned a serious hearing from politicians of all parties.³ From looking admiringly across the Atlantic at the social impact made by Evangelicals in the United States, the Alliance now found itself increasingly lauded as an exemplar of unity, balance and effectiveness by North American Evangelicals who recognized that despite their own numerical strength, they could not match the dynamic cohesion which had now been achieved by their British counterparts.⁴

Despite all this, while in Jerusalem, Calver realised that something was missing. Moreover, he was sufficiently well versed in the formation of the Evangelical worldview to appreciate that this deficit was not new. On arriving back in Britain, he articulated it thus, in a report entitled 'The Jerusalem Paper':

The last decade has witnessed transformation and growth within the Alliance. [But] the emphasis [of this paper] is on an [outstanding] strategic area of weakness, viz., EA's lack of proper theological undergirding for what it is attempting to do. In 1846, our forefathers began by establishing a clear theological foundation. They then proceeded to

³ For an account of this period in the life of the Alliance, see Lewis, 'Renewal, Recovery and Growth: 1966 Onwards', in Steve Brady & Harold Rowdon (eds.), *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 1996), pp. 178-91.

⁴ See, for example, Tom Sine, *Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America's Culture War*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

establish a vehicle for evangelical unity and enquired as to what its prime functions and practical outworkings should be. The great Scottish secessionist Thomas Chalmers raised the objection that the Alliance could become a 'do nothing' society. He would not retain that fear today. However, the opposite objection is sometimes raised—'EA does a great deal, but what is its undergirding *raison d'être*? Has it thought through the correct theological basis for its attitudes and activities?'

Calver went on to suggest reasons why such issues were arising:

Much of the ground for this concern emanates from the fact that the majority of EA's present leadership are activists at heart. Their desire is to build on the basis of evangelical unity those achievements which can be viewed as measurable gains. This pragmatic approach has much to commend it. It can be argued that the current membership growth indicates popular estimation of the value of what is being achieved by EA's coalitions, staff and specific initiatives. It is readily recognised that the Alliance has not deserted its theological roots. However, it is also observable that little emphasis is placed on relating these doctrinal perspectives to our current cultural and theological situation.⁵

Calver's recognition of the detrimental effects of Evangelical activism on serious theological reflection echoed a prominent theme of David Bebbington's seminal 1989 study, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*. In the wake of the Wesley-Whitefield Revival, with its characteristically 'utilitarian' approach to mission and ministry, Bebbington notes that for many Evangelicals, 'Learning [came to be] regarded as a dispensable luxury.' Hence, 'At the beginning of the nineteenth century Independent min-

isters were trained not in theology or Greek, but simply in preaching. It would have been 'highly improper', according to a contributor to their magazine, 'to spend, in literary acquisitions, the time and talents which were so imperiously demanded in the harvest field'.⁶ Such pragmatism, notes Bebbington, fuelled the flexible, ad hoc ecclesiology of early Methodism and the contingency of most Nonconformist approaches to liturgy and worship during this period.⁷ As Os Guinness has observed, it also chimed in with the wider economic and social changes which were afoot in Britain during the same era:

Evangelicalism was new and different. Plainly the Established Church had no answers to the problems of the Industrial Revolution, nor the initiative to exploit the opportunities offered by the new conditions. Evangelicalism had both. Through hard work, common sense and ingenuity, evangelicals prospered and dotted the countryside and towns not only with mills, but also with church buildings. The Protestant work ethic took hold. A by-product, however, was an indifference to ideas in general and theology in particular. If God had blessed the industrial enterprise with success, what need was there of theological sophistication? Pragmatism became a pronounced characteristic of evangelicalism, and has remained so ever since.⁸

This entrepreneurial, consequentialist perspective has also been identified as a key feature of North American Evangelicalism by, among oth-

⁶ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 12.

⁷ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 65-6.

⁸ Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies: Fat Minds: Why Evangelicals Don't Think and What to Do About It*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 58.

⁵ Clive Calver, 'The Jerusalem Paper', Evangelical Alliance archive, London, dated 28.11.92, pp. 1-2.

ers, David Wells and Mark Noll. For Wells, its threat to the life of the Evangelical mind has been clear:

[Evangelicalism's] strength has always been its identification with people ... [W]hile others in America were giving their attention to building impressive religious institutions, and while many of the graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the early part of the nineteenth century continued to reflect in their ministries the older world of privilege, deference, and learning, the Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ were out on the highways and byways winning the soul of America. They profoundly affected the nation. There was, however, a cost to be paid in the upheavals that accompanied these ministries. This ambitious drive produced some savage anti-clericalism, for example, not just because of undercurrents of anti-intellectualism but also because the insurgent leaders were 'intent on destroying the monopoly of classically educated and university trained clergymen'.⁹

This vigorous populist legacy is now seen, suggests Wells, in the proliferation of the Evangelical 'religious marketplace', with an increasing numbers of parachurch ministries and agencies competing for support and money, most of them too pre-occupied with their own 'bottom line' to engage in serious collaborative theological reflection. He also sees the same legacy realized in the ever-expanding 'church growth' sector, much of which privileges results over theology, and assumes competition before cooperation.¹⁰ This fragmented picture more generally bears out what Ken Hylson-Smith

has called Evangelicalism's 'built-in tendency to be centrifugal rather than centripetal'. By its very nature, Hylson-Smith remarks, Evangelicalism 'encourages individuality, stresses personal faith and promotes distinctive individual or group expressions of faith and practice'. No doubt, such characteristics ensure a large measure of personal and corporate creativity; but, warns Hylson-Smith, they also 'almost guarantee divisiveness'.¹¹ To Noll, the roots and fruits of Evangelical anti-intellectualism appear somewhat more complex, but alongside the obscurantism engendered by such pragmatic approaches, he notes that the ardent experientialism of early Pentecostalism and dispensationalism also often militated against sustained intellectual enquiry.¹²

As a keen student of Evangelical history, Clive Calver no doubt had all these forces in mind when he wrote of pragmatism as a decidedly mixed blessing, and of the theological dangers which could befall an Alliance whose activist leadership had achieved such impressive numerical gains in so short a time. His 'Jerusalem Paper' also resonated with the concerns expressed by John Langlois and Bruce Nicholls when they had helped to form the WEF Theological Commission eighteen years before—namely, that too

⁹ David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 65.

¹⁰ Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, pp. 65-87.

¹¹ Ken Hylson-Smith, 'Roots of Pan-Evangelicalism, 1735-1835', in Steve Brady & Harold Rowdon (eds.), *For Such a Time as This: Perspectives on Evangelicalism, Past, Present and Future*, (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 1996), p. 137.

¹² Mark. A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 123-4.

many practical Evangelical initiatives turn out to be 'shallow, resulting in a ripple lasting only a generation'.¹³ Calver's solution to all this was to propose what would eventually become ACUTE.

The Jerusalem Paper recommended the appointment by the Alliance of a part-time theological adviser who would be chiefly responsible for servicing an 'Evangelical Unity Commission' comprised of both Alliance staff, Council members and specialist academics. Although the key issues outlined for consideration by this group were largely 'intra-ecclesial'—ranging from reassessment of the Alliance Basis of Faith, through Ecumenism and Charismata to Seventh Day Adventism and Separatism—Calver did also note that 'theology is not merely internal, but external in its application'. Concentration, he urged, 'must also be given to EA's role in representing evangelical theology to secular society'.¹⁴ As we shall see, this tension between internal 'peacemaking' and wider prophetic witness would become more apparent as the Commission developed.

On December 2nd 1993, almost a year to the day after 'The Jerusalem Paper' had been presented to senior staff and members of the Alliance, the inaugural meeting of the 'Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals' (CUTE) took place at the Alliance's headquarters in London. The Commission was to be co-

ordinated by Dave Cave—a Baptist minister well known for his work in urban theology and mission. By the end of the meeting, it had been agreed to replace the rather unfortunate acronym CUTE with ACUTE—the Active Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals. 'Active' was subsequently dropped in favour of 'Alliance'.

Before tracking the subsequent agenda of ACUTE, it is worth noting that even the very act of its formation set the Alliance apart from most other non-ecclesiastical Christian organizations in the UK and, one presumes, the world. In a report presented to the British office of the Bible Society in January 1997, Dr Mark Bonnington analysed the structures and processes of theological reflection in a number of Christian agencies, most of which were evangelical in outlook. While the majority of groups surveyed expressed a strong commitment to biblical and theological reflection on their work, Bonnington found that only 14% actually had a leading committee charged with offering such reflection, and only 17% a nominated individual who had been allocated this task.¹⁵ ACUTE's was thus a rare birth, even while it apparently embodied the aspirations of many within the Christian community. The 'Jerusalem Paper' had clearly envisaged it as providing much-needed scriptural and doctrinal reflection at

¹³ Langlois quoted in Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, Ch. 10.

¹⁴ Clive Calver, 'The Jerusalem Paper', Evangelical Alliance archive, 28.11.1992, pp. 9-12.

¹⁵ Mark Bonnington, 'The Bible and Christian Organisations', A Report Presented to the Bible Society Comprising the Results of the Salt and Light Research Project, January 1997, Summarised by Roy McCloughry, October 1999.

the nexus of the academic world, the church and the mission field, and in doing so saw it as speaking for many who are otherwise too busy, or too under-resourced to generate such reflection for themselves. Indeed, as Bonnington puts it in his report,

[Christian] organisations are large, complex and action-orientated and are only too well aware of pragmatism and lack of theological principle ... Usually there is no consistent hermeneutical strategy and when occasions for interpretation do occur, their relationship to the 'organisation' is not clear. Most organisations engage in too little discussion to provide a starting point for this process ... Even so, organisations should not hope to agree in advance a 'correct' and agreed hermeneutical stance as a way of finessing all the problems and disagreements involved in theological dialogue and biblical interpretation. To do so would stifle creativity and be impractical, since openness to the problems being faced at any one time is essential. Interpretation is a continual dialogue with the real world as well as with scripture, and that world is fast changing.¹⁶

While from the outset ACUTE was to be tied firmly to the Alliance's Basis of Faith, it was recognized by Clive Calver and others that the application of that Basis in particular cases could not always be straightforward, and would require very much the sort of organic hermeneutical endeavour defined by Bonnington.

The Development and Work of ACUTE

In his introductory remarks to the first Commission meeting, Calver

stressed that the group had been mandated to 'work through' issues 'which divide evangelicals', and to report directly to the Executive. In order to do this effectively, it had been composed, he said, to reflect the denominational and doctrinal diversity of the Alliance's membership. In this sense, it mirrored the existing ethos of the TC, which from the outset had sought to represent the widest possible range of international evangelical scholarship.¹⁷ Calver then added the startling comment that the Commission would constitute 'the single greatest influence on Alliance policy'.¹⁸

In the seven and a half years since its inception, it must be said that this bold vision of ACUTE's spearheading general Alliance strategy and forward planning still has some way to go! Even so, I would submit that ACUTE, and the wider theological work it has spawned, has made a valuable contribution, not only to the output of the Alliance as a whole, but to its essential self-understanding as an organization. This has been borne out by the fact that the original half-time appointment of Dave Cave, which ran from 1993-96, was expanded after I took over in 1997 to a 4.5 day-a-week post. This now virtually full-time job also entails the running of a permanent in-house 'Theology Department' within the Alliance, whose brief beyond ACUTE per se is to handle members' enquiries, liaise with the media,

¹⁶ Mark Bonnington, 'The Bible and Christian Organisations', pp. 17-18

¹⁷ Fuller, *People of the Mandate*, Ch.10.

¹⁸ Minutes of the Commission on Unity and Truth Among Evangelicals, December 2nd 1993.

train staff in theological matters relevant to their work, operate a dedicated page on the Alliance website, and to brief managers on doctrinal topics as appropriate.

ACUTE now comprises a Steering Group of twenty theologians under the Chairmanship of Professor David Wright of Edinburgh University. The Steering Group meets at least three times per year for half a day. It aims to reflect the breadth of the Alliance's constituency while maintaining a high level of theological expertise. Roughly two-thirds of the Group are academic theologians working in theological colleges and university departments, or involved regularly in theological education. The remaining third consists of pastors, teachers and practitioners working more directly 'in the field', but committed to serious theological reflection.

As appropriate, the Steering Group appoints specialist Working Groups to deal in depth with a particular matter of concern, and to report on that matter in print. These Working Groups normally number 6-7 and comprise those who have an established 'track record' of work in the area being covered—either in publications, academic teaching, research or grass roots ministry. In addition, from time to time there has been scope for ACUTE to contract an individual specialist to carry out a particular piece of work on its behalf. This has consisted of research, writing a short paper, editing or coordinating a conference.

Texts produced for publication by ACUTE are normally peer reviewed

by a wider circle of nominated specialists and interested parties. Draft versions of reports and papers are usually sent by e-mail for comment to such peer reviewers. Their insights are then incorporated, as appropriate, into the editing process.

ACUTE makes its work available in various ways, ranging from detailed commercially-produced volumes, through consultations, to short magazine and web site articles.

The most in-depth means by which ACUTE deals with theological issues is through the publication of books. As with the WEF Theological Commission, these are produced by its Working Groups in collaboration with Paternoster Press. Paternoster run a special 'ACUTE' imprint for such publications and cover all production, marketing and distribution costs on our behalf. So far, ACUTE has produced two book-length reports with Paternoster, both of which have now been reproduced on a special CD-ROM of WEF resources. The first, *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality* was published in January 1998. The second, *The Nature of Hell*, appeared in April 2000.

Both texts have been reprinted, and because of the high media profile of the Alliance, have also received extensive coverage in the press and on radio. In October 2000, *The Nature of Hell* was the subject of an 8-page cover feature by Robert A. Petersen in the leading American magazine *Christianity Today*. These publications have done much to establish ACUTE as a serious contributor to evangelical

theological debate, and have helped to assuage a criticism often previously levelled at the Alliance, and acknowledged explicitly by Clive Calver in the Jerusalem Paper—namely, that it would not engage sufficiently in theological analysis.

Further reports are now in process on Evangelicals and the Orthodox Church, theological issues arising from generationally-based mission and ministry, and the prosperity gospel.

Alongside these full, Working Group-produced reports, ACUTE has also begun to produce certain special texts which are either written or edited by named writers. These are not collaborative to the same degree as full reports, but still make a significant contribution to the theological work and profile of the Alliance. Two such books are imminent as I write. *'Toronto' in Perspective* is a collection of essays, statements and sources reflecting on theological issues raised by the so-called Toronto Blessing phenomenon of the mid-1990s. *One Body in Christ: The History of the Evangelical Alliance* has been co-written by Ian Randall and myself, and seeks to set the development of the UK Alliance against the broader backdrop of world Evangelicalism.

ACUTE also produces briefing papers, which range from approximately two to five thousand words. These address specific theological issues on which some guidance, information or position-statement is required from the Alliance, but for which a book is deemed unnecessary. So far, such papers have cov-

ered the topics of evangelical identity, and the historicity of Jesus' birth and resurrection and the theological basis of morality.

In addition to papers made available publicly, Dave Cave and I have each produced briefing documents for the Alliance's Council on specific items of concern, ranging from the ethics of the National Lottery to the question of whether Christian organizations and charities should tithe their income.

As well as providing a medium through which to disseminate shorter papers, the Alliance's internet site offers a means by which members and others can e-mail theological questions and comments. Some of the messages received are answered directly by me; others are now passed on to ACUTE Steering Group members for expert response.

Further to all this, ACUTE is regularly asked to supply short features on theological topics to the Alliance's members' magazine, *Idea*. Past articles have summarized the books and papers mentioned above, and have also dealt with alternative worship, demonology, ecclesiology, Christian aesthetics and the radicalism of Jesus.

Under certain circumstances ACUTE has also organized consultations of theologians and church leaders on issues which have been thought to merit preliminary exploration and dialogue before any more definitive pronouncements have been made. The controversial matters of the 'Toronto Blessing' and the 'Prosperity Gospel' have so far

prompted such consultations. Moreover, in July 2000, ACUTE acted for the first time as a co-sponsor, with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, of the Tyndale Fellowship Triennial Conference for evangelical theologians. With support from ACUTE, Henri Blocher delivered a special plenary lecture on 'God and Time'. It is hoped that this partnership will be developed in future. In the meantime, ACUTE is also considering the establishment of its own theological conference in the years between Tyndale Triennials. A first conference is being planned on the theme of 'Pan-Evangelical Theology: Models, Problems and Opportunities'. As this proposed title suggests, the 'commission' paradigm has occasioned difficulties as well as joys for ACUTE. I shall now turn to consider these difficulties and joys, in the hope that my assessment of them at this point in ACUTE's development will prompt further reflection within and beyond the UK.

Problems and Opportunities of the 'Commission' Model

In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of doing theology through a pan-Evangelical commission, it will be instructive to return to the very beginning of ACUTE's life, and to take account of some fundamental issues raised at the initial Steering Group meeting in December 1993. These issues have continued to exercise the Commission ever since, and to illustrate how we have grappled with them in practice, I shall show their relevance to the

recent preparation and publication of *The Nature of Hell*.

Truth, Unity and Diversity: Vanhoozer, Discourse, Canon and Drama

First, a vital point was aired in 1993 with regard to how that unity-in-diversity which ACUTE had been formed to promote might affect its mandate to articulate *truth*. Both at that time, and often since, the usual observations have been made that Evangelicalism is a multifarious movement embodying different dogmatic systems, politics and sub-cultures, such that its unity could never be mere uniformity, and must perforce entail a degree of diversity. Yet as a Commission also formed to define sound doctrine, debate has arisen as to whether this diversity might have any significant implications for the operative epistemology of ACUTE—that is, whether the plurality manifest in the group was at best an impediment to be overcome in the quest for the unitary truth of the Lord God who is One God, or whether it instead reflected something intrinsic to *the nature of divine truth as such*. In other words, was the *de facto* theological plurality of the Commission a purely provisional and pragmatic plurality, or could it in some way be construed as a *principled* plurality?

Consideration of this issue is ongoing within ACUTE, but helpful light is shed on it, and on other challenges facing us, in a recent article by Kevin Vanhoozer entitled 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of

Theology'.¹⁹

Vanhoozer begins by noting that in reaction to liberal and radical movements which denied the verbal and cognitive nature of divine revelation, many Evangelical theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries developed models of doctrinal truth which identified God's Word closely with the unitary propositions of Scripture. While clearly capturing an important facet of God's self-disclosure, Vanhoozer comments that this approach has tended to present the task of theology as 'the systematization of the information conveyed through biblical [statements]'. By contrast, he suggests that developments in contemporary linguistics and linguistic philosophy have helped theologians to appreciate that the range of communication in Scripture in fact extends much wider. Vanhoozer is here bearing out what may be described as a more general turn in contemporary evangelical theology—the turn to *discourse*.²⁰

In the first place, discourses are linguistic phenomena, representing 'continuous stretches of language longer than a sentence'—stretches in which one phrase or utterance 'contextualises' the phrases of utterances which follow it.²¹ More generally, however, discourse is configured as a *human activity*—an interrela-

tional enterprise in which meaning is seen to emerge from what Gillian Brown and Gordon Yule call 'a dynamic process in which language is used as an instrument of communication in a context by a speaker/writer to express ... and achieve intentions.'²²

While not neglecting the propositional model, Vanhoozer advances this discursal paradigm as one which more fully describes the evangelical theological task. In this paradigm, not only is the God Who Speaks also in discourse with us, through prophecy, Scripture and the living Word Jesus Christ; he is additionally in discourse with *himself*, through the mutual interaction of the three persons of the Trinity—a mutual interaction which is reflected in the ongoing 'conversation' of the various traditions of the church. Hence, Vanhoozer infers a positive theological plurality which, far from being inimical to God's purpose, is woven into his cosmic plan:

A certain plurality would seem to be biblical. At the very least, there is a recognizable plurality in the communicative acts of Scripture ... While the truth about what God has done in Christ may transcend the particular interpretative perspectives, interpreters cannot. While it is true 'that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:19), we may need more than one interpretative framework to articulate fully its meaning and significance, just as it took

¹⁹ Vanhoozer, Kevin J., 'The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology', in John G. Stackhouse Jr (ed.), *Evangelical Futures*, (Leicester: Apollos), pp. 61-106.

²⁰ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 80-81.

²¹ David Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (3rd Edn), (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,

1991), p. 106; Peter Auer, 'Introduction: John Gumperz' Approach to Contextualization', in P. Auer & A. di Luzo (eds.), *The Contextualization of Language*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins), pp. 1-37.

²² G. Brown, and G. Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 26.

four Gospels to articulate the truth of Jesus Christ. There may therefore be several normative points of view in the Bible that are all authoritative because they disclose *aspects of the truth*. It is therefore possible simultaneously to admit a multiplicity of perspectives and to maintain 'aspectual' realism.²³

As for the Bible, so also for interpretative traditions, Vanhoozer advocates a constructive 'catholicity' which appreciates what different strands within the church might variously contribute to the task of evangelical theologizing. Drawing on the work of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, he proposes a positive 'plural unity' which recognizes that no single human voice—no one perspective or genre of criticism—is able to exhaust the truth of a text. Hence, as Vanhoozer puts it, 'The dialogue's the thing'—dialogue being a cardinal manifestation of discourse. He goes on:

One of the defining characteristics of dialogue is its 'unfinalizability'. The moral for Christian theology is clear: 'Final' or absolute biblical interpretations are properly eschatological. For the moment, we must cast our doctrines not in the language of heaven but in the time-bound, culture-bound languages of earth, governed, of course, by the dialogue we find in Scripture itself.²⁴

Whilst there is little doubt *in fact* that ACUTE and WEF's TC proceed along such dialogical lines, it is important to emphasize here what Vanhoozer says about finality and authority in respect of the truth which is dialogically explored. He is well aware that there are plenty of

non-Evangelical traditions which have become content to conceive the discursual/dialogical model as either infinitely 'open' or infinitely self-reflexive. On the radical side, following Roland Barthes, the view that language is an endless chain of signification in which 'meaning ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it', and in which God, reason, science and law are eternally 'deferred', becomes a keynote of poststructuralist and deconstructionist theology.²⁵ More moderately, the Postliberalism of George Lindbeck, Hans Frei and others maintains a place for authority, but typically locates it with the 'cultural-linguistic system' developed by the interpreting community, rather than within the revealed Word of God itself.²⁶

By contrast, for Vanhoozer there is no question of abandoning Scripture as the locus of theological authority. Rather, it is the *manner in which biblical authority is understood* which, he suggests, merits reassessment by Evangelicals. Rather than presenting theology purely in terms of a unitary Word, Vanhoozer advises that we promulgate our vocation as theologians more clearly in relation to the *canonicity* of Scripture. The term 'canonicity' is carefully chosen here, because it is seen to capture both the fixed and formal status of the biblical text, while at the same time conveying its transparent

²³ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 78-9.

²⁴ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 149. For Vanhoozer's fuller consideration of this model, see his *Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

²⁶ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 77.

multiplicity—of books, authors, codes, languages, styles, settings and, perhaps, of theologies.²⁷

Developing a fertile analogy with dramatic performance, Vanhoozer underlines the importance for evangelical theology of respecting the author's intent, and of adhering to the given 'script'. Yet he adds that different 'stagings' of the play might actually complement, rather than subtract from, our appreciation of it as a whole artwork, or 'canon':

As often as not, we are called upon to make theological judgments in the absence of clear and distinct propositions. What we have instead to guide us are some broad principles, a number of biblical examples, and a host of canonical judgements, formulated for specific situations, on which it is appropriate to say and do in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Bible does not give us axioms for a theological calculus so much as a variety of narratives, laws, prophecies, letters, and songs that cultivate the evangelical heart, mind, and imagination. Evangelical theology is a matter of deliberating well (e.g. canonically) about the gospel in non-canonical (e.g. contemporary) situations.²⁸

Vanhoozer is emphatically not suggesting here that all interpretations are equally valid. The testing of an interpretation through time, and through dialogue with other well-honed interpretations, will do much to establish its value—the extent to which it 'funds' the canon of evangelical theological understanding. Indeed, Vanhoozer particularly appreciates the contribution which can be made by an experienced and time-honoured 'cast' of denomina-

tional traditions in the hermeneutical process:

I for one would be sorry if everyone thought just like me. I would deeply regret it if there were no Mennonite, or Lutheran, or Greek Orthodox voices in the world. Why? Because I think that truth would be better served by their continuing presence. To some, this may be a shocking way of thinking about truth. Is not truth one? Must not our confessions of faith contain not only affirmations but also denials? Yes! But my question concerns whether a systematics that employs only a single conceptual system can fully articulate the truth.²⁹

Of course, mere durability is, in and of itself, no guarantee of orthodoxy, and it is not hard to cite instances in which a long-standing, consensual evangelical reading of Scripture has fallen to superior exegesis (e.g. slavery). Indeed, as Vanhoozer concedes, 'to locate authority in the community itself is to forgo the possibility of prophetic critique'.³⁰ And yet his view of a collaborative alliance of theologians from diverse traditions seeking communally to express a truth which they take to be objective, if not immediately exhaustible, and which they acknowledge to be supremely mediated for today through the canonical Scriptures, comes close to what many in ACUTE and the TC have actually experienced as we have done theology together on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance and WEF.

In such a model, truth need by no means be 'compromised' by dialogue, collegiality and consensus. On the contrary, it may be revealed at a

²⁷ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 81-4.

²⁸ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', pp. 83-4.

²⁹ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

³⁰ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 80.

more godly pitch, since it is through the church, rather than through isolated individual theologians, that God has promised to bring his glory definitively to bear (Eph. 3:21). Whereas a great deal of today's 'western' theology, whether practised in the West itself or exported to the two-thirds world, is atomized, individually-focused and effectively divorced from the life of the church,³¹ ACUTE in a modest way reflects something of the ethos of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and the earliest ecumenical Councils of the post-apostolic period. It attempts to do theology *ecclesially*—that is, in a manner that is consciously of, with and for the church, as well as for wider society. As the record shows, the discussions which took place in these early councils were hardly superficial or uniform; indeed, they were often highly charged. Yet by God's grace positions were defined, and texts produced, which could realistically claim to articulate the mind of the church. Granted, they might have looked like 'compromise' to some, and granted, in the case of councils like Chalcedon, they often marked out boundaries rather than presenting exact definitions on every point. Yet it is doubtful whether anything better, or more representative, could have been produced at the time. While it only claims to act for one stream of the wider church, and while it clearly does not carry the

authority of such ancient councils, ACUTE does seek to operate on the same basic, ecclesial model.

Now if we accept Vanhoozer's canonical analogy as an analogy of both plural unity and bounded unity—of both diversity and restraint, freedom and order, grace and law—we must immediately face the question of *how much* variety can be allowed—of how pluralistic we can become before we threaten the definitive, irreducible norms of Evangelical belief.

Not surprisingly, this is an ever-present concern in the work of ACUTE, but it came most starkly to a head as we developed our report on the nature of hell.³²

For the last decade or more, there has been an escalation of evangelical debate and tension on the subject of hell, and in particular, on issues related to its duration, finality, quality and purpose. While the majority of Evangelicals continue to hold that hell entails conscious everlasting punishment for the unredeemed, a growing number of evangelical theologians, pastors and lay people are embracing the doctrine of conditional immortality. This teaches that although they will face final judgement and some degree of divine punishment after that, the unredeemed will eventually be destroyed, or annihilated (hence the term 'annihilationism', which technically refers to the outcome of this view rather than its whole theology, but which in prac-

³¹ For corroboration of this point see, George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, (Leicester: IVP, 1994).

³² ACUTE, *The Nature of Hell*, (Carlisle: Pater-noster Press, 2000).

tice functions as a synonym for it).³³ Both sides of this debate have their signature texts: Mark 9:48, Matthew 25:46, Revelation 14:9-11 and 20:10 are most often adduced by traditionalists; Matthew 10:28, John 3:16, Romans 6:23 and 2 Peter 3:7 are frequently claimed for the conditionalist cause. Other verses—not least 2 Thessalonians 1:9—appear equally amenable to both sides, containing as they do images of both punishment *and* destruction.³⁴

Now we were aware when we began work on this issue that the conditionalist view had to some extent already been assimilated within the Evangelical constituency. Derek Tidball's influential book *Who Are the Evangelicals?* had in fact already defined this debate on hell as a distinctively Evangelical one, which many in the wider church and world would regard as an internal 'family' dispute.³⁵ Likewise, Rob Warner and Clive Calver's 1996 account of Evangelical unity and doctrine, *Together We Stand*, had portrayed conditionalists as an established 'Evangelical party'.³⁶

On the other hand, we were also aware that concern had been expressed in some quarters that conditionalists might be transgressing the boundaries of Vanhoozer's Evangelical 'canon'. Thus both Anthony

Hoekema and John Gerstner had provocatively cast the growth of evangelical conditionalism as a 'revolt', with Gerstner calling its proponents to repent as a matter of urgency.³⁷ Then again, it became clear quite early on in our investigations that Evangelical conditionalists were now emerging as equally passionate advocates of their own position. Indeed, John Wenham, Clark Pinnock and Robert Brow had presented themselves as nothing less than 'proselytisers' for the conditionalist cause, seeking to 'convert' Evangelicalism from what they now saw as a grossly mistaken doctrine of eternal conscious punishment, to one which would, in their view, reflect the true message of the gospel.³⁸

Bearing such tensions in mind, ACUTE was forced in a very stark way to determine issues of truth and falsity in respect of hell. More subtly, and perhaps more complexly, however, it was also compelled to consider those aspects of the doctrine of hell which Evangelicals should regard as primary and non-negotiable, as against those which might be deemed adiaphora—that is, secondary concerns over which it would be possible to differ with integrity. In doing so, it was prompted more gen-

³³ This background is explained more fully in *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 1-8.

³⁴ For a detailed discussion of the relevant biblical material see *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 36-52.

³⁵ Derek J. Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994), pp. 152-5.

³⁶ Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand: Evangelical Convictions, Unity and Vision*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), p. 87.

³⁷ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), pp. 265; John Gerstner, *Repent or Perish*, (Ligonier, PA.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990).

³⁸ Wenham, John, 'The Case for Conditional Immortality' in, Nigel M. de S Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), pp. 190-1; Clark Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), pp. 88, 94.

erally to reflect on the methods by which Evangelicals in a collegial setting might distinguish canonicity from non-canonicity, primacy from secondariness, essential from inessential dogma.

As it was, we concluded the report by recognizing conditional immortality as a 'significant minority Evangelical position'—one which stands on the margins of Evangelical belief, but which falls within, rather than beyond, its parameters. By contrast, we defined both universalism and 'second chance' or 'post-mortem' salvation as lying beyond the bounds of legitimacy.³⁹

What emerges particularly from our reflection on the essential-inessential tension is that the distinction of primary from secondary issues depends to a large degree on how one chooses to define Evangelicalism. At present, there is an abundance of studies addressing this matter.⁴⁰ All agree that Evangelicals are those who believe in a triune God, the incarnation, the sacrificial atonement of Christ, his bodily resurrection and second coming, justification by faith, the supreme authority of the Bible and the missionary prerogative. Yet it is clear that differences

arise when Evangelical authenticity is assessed in relation to issues such as baptismal practice, the ecumenical movement, the ordination of women, biblical inerrancy, evolution, spiritual gifts, the millennium and, for that matter, the nature of hell. Some writers see one or more of these issues as 'primary' rather than 'secondary', with lines between essentials and non-essentials being drawn in different places. For others, none of them would warrant separation or breach of fellowship.

Beyond all this, the actual criteria by which it is determined whether something is primary or secondary struck us as being far from straightforward. It might be reassuring to think that these criteria were purely biblical-theological. But in practice, they also include considerations of history, culture politics and relationships.

Truth, Unity and Scripture

Virtually all Evangelicals would agree that the first criterion by which we must establish whether something is orthodox or heterodox, or primary or secondary, is the criterion of Scripture. The Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith typifies this priority when it takes its definitive guide in such matters to be 'the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments', and affirms them to be 'entirely trustworthy' and 'supremely authoritative in all matters of faith and conduct'. Given Evangelical agreement on the Bible's witness to the existence of hell *per se*, the question facing ACUTE was whether Scripture depicts this hell so unambiguously as

³⁹ *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 131-134.

⁴⁰ E.g. Derek Tidball, *Who are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994); Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) and *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism*, (Leicester: Apollon, 1996); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. (Leicester: IVP, 1994); David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Leicester: IVP, 1993); Mark Thompson, *Saving the Heart: What is an Evangelical?* (London: St Matthias Press, 1995).

a place of eternal torment that no alternative view could legitimately be deemed 'evangelical'.

In addressing this key question, the report notes that the main evangelical proponents of conditionalism demonstrate a high regard for the authority of Scripture, and seek to make their case by thorough exegesis of the relevant texts. From this perspective at least, we suggest that they operate as Evangelicals. Furthermore, we go so far as to say that their work highlights verses and images which some traditionalists might previously have ignored, or even misconstrued. No one, we suggest, who has studied the work of Edward Fudge or David Powys could seriously read the many biblical references to God's 'destruction' of the impenitent without considering whether they might, in fact, denote a final cessation of existence, rather than endless conscious torment.⁴¹

Having made this point, however, the report goes on to concede that a properly Evangelical *intention* to uphold the primacy of Scripture does not necessarily lead to good Evangelical theology. Evangelicals, we observe, characteristically seek to make doctrine clear and consistent, since they are those who maintain the core Reformation principle of biblical 'perspicuity'. On the face of it, we suggest, this would militate against a conciliatory, 'both/and'

approach to the hell debate. After all, it seems illogical to propose that people could be both annihilated *and* tormented forever. In the end, surely either traditionalists must be right and conditionalists wrong, or vice versa. To conclude otherwise would, surely, be un-Evangelical?⁴²

On one level, it might have been adequate to deal with this point by invoking Vanhoozer's 'eschatological' view on Evangelical truth. We might simply have agreed that eternal conscious punishment and annihilation cannot logically be reconciled, but have then suggested that since there appear to be images of both in Scripture, it might be necessary to suspend judgement on how they relate to one another until this interrelation becomes clear at the parousia. But as it is, we do not leave the explanation there. Rather, we consider another possibility—a 'third way'—driven not by insipid compromise, but by astrophysics. We emphasize that both conditionalism and traditionalism rely to some extent on words and images from our present space-time world to portray a destiny which lies beyond that world. For the present, however, we underline that space and time are known to be relative, that time is experienced differently at different velocities, and that visibility is affected by gravity. Against this background, we cite an article by Douglas Spanner to suggest that one recently discovered feature of the universe might help the resolve the tradition-

⁴¹ *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 124-6. Cf. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality* (Revised Edn.), (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994 [1982]); David Powys, 'Hell': *A Hard Look at a Hard Question*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).

⁴² *The Nature of Hell*, p. 125.

alist-conditionalist dichotomy. A spaceship travelling into a black hole would be sucked in and annihilated. Yet an observer would continue to see this ship appear to hover above the horizon of visibility, gradually fading but without definite end. Similarly, we propose, hell might be *experienced* as annihilation but *observed* as continuing punishment, with those condemned gradually fading from view.⁴³ From the ACUTE perspective, this is a useful example of the way in which fresh Evangelical thinking, which is prepared to look beyond entrenched dogmatic convictions, might contribute to the cause of Evangelical unity.

Truth, Unity and Tradition

For all our commitment to the primacy of Scripture, it would be hard to deny the role of historical considerations in seeking to distinguish essentials from non-essentials in the pursuit of Evangelical unity. This process typically entails looking back to those periods of the church's life when God has invigorated his people through reformation, awakening and renewal. The birth of Protestantism in the early 1500s, the Puritan era and the Evangelical Revival are obvious reference-points for us here.⁴⁴ Indeed, these eras tend to supply the key traditions in Van-

hoozer's canon of pan-Evangelical interpretation.

Now in *The Nature of Hell*, we recognize that where eschatology is concerned, this historical criterion of unity is comparatively unfavourable for conditionalism. After all, we say, evangelicals did not seriously entertain the eventual extinction of the unsaved until the late nineteenth century, and then did so only in relatively small numbers.⁴⁵ Besides, it had been consistently anathematised by the church in the preceding thirteen centuries. At the same time, however, we point out that Evangelicals are typically cautious about tradition as compared to Scripture, and are especially wary of appeals to ecclesiastical precedent. At this point we invoke the aforementioned example of the way Evangelicals modified their thinking on slavery in the early 1800s. Here, we suggest, was a 'doctrine' and practice that many evangelicals had advocated, and justified from Scripture, but which came to be seen as misguided, and which we would now reject out of hand.⁴⁶

As I have reported, some evangelical conditionalists contend that eternal conscious punishment is at least as deserving of theological revision as was slavery. What is clear, however, is that for Evangelicals worthy of the name, revision on this or any other historic article of faith must proceed on the basis of biblical interpretation rather than simply by emotion, or even, by moral indignation alone.

⁴³ Douglas Spanner, 'Is Hell Forever?' *Churchman* 110/2, 1996, 107-120. *The Nature of Hell*, p. 125.

⁴⁴ Alister McGrath makes illuminating use of the Reformers, for example, as one inspiration for evangelicalism today: *Roots that Refresh: A Celebration of Reformation Spirituality*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.

⁴⁵ *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 126-7.

⁴⁶ *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 126-7.

Here the report argues that history can help, since the interpretative tradition on a biblical text or doctrine can indicate how heavily the burden of proof lies on those who wish to change things. In the case of conditionalists this burden of proof is considerable, since the traditional view has prevailed for by far the greater part of the church's history. It is consequently incumbent upon them to make their case with humility and respect among traditionalists, whose convictions in this case reflect the legacy of Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and others who helped most significantly to shape the Evangelical movement.

Truth, Unity, Attitudes and Behaviour

If the definition of Evangelical unity is at least partly historical as well as biblical, then we ought to acknowledge that it must also to some extent be *attitudinal* and *behavioural*. In *The Nature of Hell*, we suggest that doctrine plays a part in such definitions, but add that it is not identical with them. Probably the best known attitudinal/behavioural definition of Evangelicalism is that offered by David Bebbington. Bebbington identifies four key characteristics of an evangelical—conversionism (a call to people to be converted), activism (an active faith affecting all of life), biblicism (a commitment to the authority and inspiration of the Bible), and crucicentrism (holding the cross at the centre of all life and theology).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, pp. 10-12.

In *The Nature of Hell* we observe that according to these and most similar taxonomies, those who hold a conditionalist position would remain within the parameters of authentic evangelicalism. Certainly, the conditionalists whose work we scrutinize in the report are shown as unequivocally committed to conversion and mission, to activism in the world, to the Bible as their ultimate authority, and to the centrality of the cross. By this set of criteria, at least, we conclude that those specific details of hell's duration, quality, finality and purpose which are at issue in the current Evangelical debate are comparatively less essential.⁴⁸

Truth, Unity and Relationships

As a final factor in determining the parameters of Evangelical unity, the ACUTE working group on hell comments that Evangelicals often identify one another not because of any clear outward 'badge', but because of what might be called a 'family resemblance'. In practical terms, we function within relational networks and, although we may differ from one another in many other ways, we generally recognize and accommodate the differences. Whether we talk of there being various tribes of Evangelicals,⁴⁹ branches of the same tree,⁵⁰ colours of the rainbow, or

⁴⁸ *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 127-8.

⁴⁹ As in Clive Calver and Rob Warner, *Together We Stand: Evangelical Convictions, Unity and Vision*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996).

⁵⁰ As in Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism*, (London: SPCK, 1996).

facets of a Rubik's cube,⁵¹ in time we become adept as recognising 'family' when we see them. And the report concludes that when it comes to those who have moved from traditionalism towards conditionalism, the familial ties remain strong. Such people may have shifted to the margins on the matter of hell, yet it is clear that virtually all of those who have defended conditionalism in print have done so as self-professed and well-established members of the Evangelical household. Some, indeed, have made enormous contributions to it (e.g. John Stott, John Wenham, Michael Green and Philip Hughes).⁵²

These images of 'family' and 'tribe' are, of course, more than simply pragmatic. They are significant scriptural motifs. The people of God, though diverse through time and space, together form part of the same extended community. On this analogy, those who have embraced conditionalism, while disagreeing with the majority, could be said to have done so overwhelmingly from *within* the community, and on *behalf of* the community. Furthermore, despite the protestations of Gerstner, Hoekema et al, it seems likely that they will remain within the community as a whole, even if it finally rejects their convictions on this specific point of doctrine.

Now of course, as Theological Adviser to the major pan-Evangelical body in the UK, and as editor of *The Nature of Hell*, I am aware that

these observations on the future of conditionalism and conditionalists might well look like self-fulfilling prophecies. After all, by publishing a report which deems conditionalism to be legitimate, ACUTE has probably gone a long way to making it so—at least for Evangelicalism in Britain, and at least this side of Judgement Day! This observation in turn raises a final, major question for our examination of how evangelical theological method is affected by the 'commission' approach.

Truth, Unity, Expediency—and Hope

Given all that I have said about the interaction of exegesis, doctrine, tradition, culture, worldview and community, and bearing in mind how this interaction is born out by *The Nature of Hell*, one is led to ask just how far it is really possible in a body like ACUTE, or the WEF Theological Commission, to operate free from contingent political, relational and institutional imperatives. To put it more concretely: if *The Nature of Hell* had declared unequivocally against conditionalism, and, more to the point, if we had deemed it to be incompatible with the UK Alliance's Basis of Faith, then we would logically have had to expel one of our most respected Vice Presidents, Rev Dr John Stott—for it was Stott who, in 1988, did so much to open up this debate by preferring annihilationism

⁵¹ As in Derek Tidball, *Who Are the Evangelicals?* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1994).

⁵² *The Nature of Hell*, pp. 128-9.

to the traditional view.⁵³ We would also almost certainly have lost other esteemed British evangelical leaders who happened to be conditionalists—not to mention an unpredictable number of rank and file members. Of course, having decided to accept conditionalism rather than reject it, we faced the opposite prospect of traditionalists resigning because of a perceived downgrade in this area.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that ACUTE functions quite apart from such strategic concerns. We are, after all, the theological commission of the Evangelical Alliance, rather than an independent, autonomous think tank. We are funded by the Alliance, to serve the Alliance, and it is therefore not surprising that, to a large extent, we reflect in our composition, research and reports the *existing* theological profile of our membership. Moreover, we do not merely guess at or assume this profile; we know it, because from time to time we poll our members on key theological questions. For example, prior to embarking on *The Nature of Hell*, a recent survey had informed us that 79.6% of our affiliated churches affirmed belief in hell as eternal conscious punishment, while 14.2% favoured the doctrine of annihilation.⁵⁴

⁵³ John Stott and David L. Edwards, *Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988), pp. 287-304; 312-329. For an account of the disagreements among Evangelicals arising from Stott's work, see Tony Gray, 'Destroyed for Ever: An Examination of the Debates Concerning Annihilationism and Conditional Immortality', *Themelios* 21:2 (January 1996), pp. 14-18.

⁵⁴ *The Nature of Hell*, p. 6, n.13.

Plainly, one must beware of being 'led' by such figures. It would be easy to run ACUTE in such a way that it merely reflected back to the Alliance what the Alliance already was, and what it already believed—with footnotes added for a sheen of academic respectability. Our brief may be advisory rather than prescriptive, but we must surely be more than simply descriptive. There are many books in print which address Evangelical theological divisions by essentially explaining those divisions without comment, or by presenting a debate between representatives of the various key positions. Both approaches have their merits, and as I have explained, we have followed this latter format in our next ACUTE publication, which seeks to draw lessons for all quarters of the church from the so-called Toronto Blessing. Yet there is much to be said for undertaking the harder work of producing genuinely conciliar, 'through-composed' texts like *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality* and *The Nature of Hell*. The writing, editing and peer review process can be painstaking and deeply frustrating, but at its best, it can operate as an exemplar of what Evangelical theology must be—that is, theology in the service of the church.

Similarly, since the UK Alliance is a broad based body which takes in Cessationists and Charismatics, five-point Calvinists and radical Arminians, Anglican Bishops and Brethren elders, there is a serious danger of generating little more than what might cynically be termed 'theological diplomacy'—that is, a bland dis-

course of generalities and platitudes designed, however elegantly, to do little more than 'keep the peace'. The applied linguists Geoffrey Leech and Jenny Thomas have coined the term 'pragmatic ambivalence' to describe the use of language in such a way as to keep two apparently contradictory assertions in play for some wider practical purpose.⁵⁵ The eucharistic vocabulary of the Book of Common Prayer is, perhaps, a more constructive example of this phenomenon; the recent attempts of mixed denominations like the United Reformed and Methodist churches in the UK, and the Presbyterian Church (USA), to define their position on homosexuality, have proved less edifying, and ultimately less irenic.⁵⁶ While there may be an inevitable dimension of 'pragmatic ambivalence' in collaborative, interdenominational theology, it demands continual scrutiny and restraint.

There are, then, genuine pitfalls associated with the enterprise in which ACUTE, TC and other such bodies are engaged—genuine dangers that we might fail, out of timidity, or fear, or financial concern, or academic self-preservation—to let our Yes be our Yes and our No our No. Yet as I have suggested in rela-

tion to hell and the new cosmology, the discourse of an evangelical theological commission does not have to reduce to the lowest common denominator; it can operate as a highest common factor. The language of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed may have been pragmatically ambivalent; it may have been highly politicised and historically expedient; yet it also happens to be sublime and, most important of all, faithful to Scripture. ACUTE may not aspire to such heights, and as I have stressed we certainly do not have a comparable authority. Even so, my hope is that we and similar evangelical commissions across the world will, in our collegial and consensual quest, correspond to that 'evangelical reality' which, in Vanhoozer's words, 'is disclosed to us in the plural form of the biblical witness to the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'. With Vanhoozer also, I trust that by God's grace, our mission of theology will thus be related to the mission of the church—'creatively and faithfully—dramatically!—to interpret and perform the way, the truth, and the life'.⁵⁷

APPENDIX: ACUTE'S MISSION STATEMENT

ACUTE exists:

To work for consensus on theological issues that test evangelical unity, and to provide, on behalf of evangelicals, a coordinated theological response to matters of wider public debate.

⁵⁵ G.N. Leech and J. Thomas, 'Language, Meaning and Context: Pragmatics', in N.E. Collinge, *An Encyclopedia of Language*, (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 173-206. For a detailed discussion of this phenomenon in relation to theology, see David Hilborn, 'The Pragmatics of Liturgical Discourse', Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1994.

⁵⁶ See ACUTE, *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 7-11.

⁵⁷ Vanhoozer, 'The Voice and the Actor', p. 106.

ACUTE recognises and urges others to recognise:

- That views which seem contradictory can sometimes be complementary
- That differences are sometimes exaggerated by historic separations, which can lead to a failure to understand the language or the perspective of the other side.
- That nonetheless, some differences are genuine and real.

ACUTE believes that within the framework of unity in Christ and agreement on basic doctrine:

- Some differences can be resolved by thoughtful discussion.
- Some differences are more substantial, but can be accepted as allowed diversity.

ACUTE is committed to:

- Working to create better mutual understanding and a resolution of differences, or an agreement to differ, within the framework of our unity in Christ.
- Seeking to clarify those issues which are primary and essential, and the extent to which varying forms of words are acceptable in expressing them.
- Researching and analysing issues referred to it by the Evangelical Alliance and reporting as appropriate.
- Encouraging deeper theological understanding among Evangelicals.
- Providing theological reflection on major issues affecting the evangelical community.

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The Marks of the Church: A Pentecostal Re-Reading

by Amos Yong

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Pentecostalism, pneumatology, apostolicity, ecumenism, catholicity, holiness

Introduction—A Pentecostal Ecclesiology?

This paper is motivated by two primary concerns. First, there is the continually growing phenomenon of modern Pentecostalism around the world. In and through this remarkable missionary expansion lies the problem of self-understanding and self-definition. Pentecostalism in all of its variety worldwide subsists as a

convergence of free churches, but has generally not given much thought to why that is the case. This means that there is a problem of 'pentecostalism' reflected in part by the rise of the independent and house church movement, the splintering of Pentecostal denominations, and the emergence of charismatic, Third Wave, Blessing, 'New Apostolic', and other phenomena. One way to begin dealing with this problem of 'pentecostalism' is to engage the task of self-understanding and self-definition. This includes, among other things, giving an account of what it means to be the church. What is the church? How is the church to be recognized or discerned? How is the true church to be distinguished from a false church? These are the questions of ecclesiology. Pentecostals are only now beginning to reflect critically on the doctrine of the church.¹

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¹ The theme for the next annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies—'Pentecostalism and the World Church: Ecumenical Opportunities and Challenges' (to be held at Southeastern College, Lakeland, Florida, on 14-16 March 2002)—is evidence of movement in this direction.

Second, the process of ecclesial maturation goes hand in hand not only with doctrinal reflection but also with theological reflection as a whole. This means that whereas in previous generations Pentecostals theologized for themselves, Pentecostal maturity today requires us to confront the claims and reality of other Christians. No longer can Pentecostals avoid the ecumenical dimension of Christian faith. This includes coming to grips with whatever might be distinctive of Pentecostal ecclesiology vis-à-vis evangelical understandings of the nature of the church. It also includes wrestling with the nature of the church as evidenced in the wider plurality of ecclesial communities today as well as that spread throughout the historical Christian traditions. How do Pentecostals make connections with evangelical and other non-Pentecostal Christians beside proselytizing them (a charge frequently levelled against us especially by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities)? More important for the purposes of this paper, how should Pentecostals theologize ecumenically? What are the bridges or points of contact through which Pentecostals can begin to engage other evangelical and even broader Christian traditions amidst the contemporary ecumenical conversation?²

² We are now approaching the end of the first generation of Pentecostal participation in and reflection on things ecumenical, if such is measured by Pentecostal involvement in formal ecumenical dialogue. The Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue has been ongoing since 1972; the Pentecostal-WARC (World Alliance of Reformed Churches) dialogue since 1995. Of course, in all of these, Pente-

My goal is to bring together these two concerns of Pentecostal self-understanding and Pentecostal ecumenical engagement by way of developing a critical Pentecostal ecclesiology in dialogue with the traditional marks or notes of the church. Methodologically, I hope to proceed by briefly defining the marks, making some observations about them in light of Roman Catholic understandings, and suggesting some ways in which Pentecostal convictions, values, and sensibilities can contribute toward a more ecumenical ecclesiological understanding. I am optimistic that this window into the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogue may be illuminating for both the larger ecumenical conversation in general and for evangelical reflection on ecclesiology more specifically.

That Pentecostals have much to learn about ecclesiology from the Christian tradition, there is no doubt. Even to engage in reflection on the marks of the church from a Pentecostal perspective is to acknowledge that these are categorically normative in some way for orthodox ecclesiology. However, in this paper, I am not drawing attention to explicit defects in Pentecostal ecclesiology in light of the historical understanding

costal dialogue participants do not represent their denominations, but only themselves, thus revealing not only something about Pentecostal ecclesiological understanding, but also the wariness of Pentecostal ecclesial hierarchs regarding formal theological and ecumenical involvement. At another level, however, it is noteworthy that Pentecostalism has been ecumenical from its origins at Azusa Street. For a synopsis of that argument, see my 'Pentecostalism and Ecumenism: Past, Present, and Future,' *The Pneuma Review*, 5-part article, 4:1-5:1 (2001-2002).

of the church's marks or vice versa. While either project may be legitimate, my goal here is simply to attempt a more dialectical approach to see how Pentecostal ecclesiology can be enriched by the doctrine of the ecclesial marks on the one hand, even while Pentecostal perspectives can make a contribution to the ongoing discussion on the other.

One final preliminary point. The 'pentecostal' elements in what follows derive from an emerging consensus among recent Pentecostal scholarship regarding the centrality of pneumatology to Pentecostal theology and theological method, the distinctive and eschatologically oriented charismatic (or charismological) dimension of Pentecostal life and praxis, and the Pentecostal 'canon-within-the-canon' of Luke-Acts.³ This is certainly not to dismiss the non-Lukan witness of Scripture, nor does it mean to emphasize the charisms of the Spirit to the neglect

of other issues. Furthermore, it certainly does not wish to ignore the patrological and christological components of Christian theology. Rather, these are simply the perspectives that inform contemporary Pentecostal theology, and that I would hope can enrich, complement, and supplement ecumenical reflection, at least on this topic of the marks of the church.⁴ This is especially the case in so far as Protestantism in general and evangelicalism in particular still have a relatively underdeveloped ecclesiologies vis-à-vis the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions.

The Marks of the Church—A Pentecostal Re-reading

Our focus here is not only on ecclesiology as such, but more specifically on the marks of the church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.⁵ Yet, as

³ For my take on the centrality of pneumatology and charismology to Pentecostal theology, see *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 20 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), esp. chs. 5-7. I develop further a pneumatological approach to theological method in *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*, New Critical Thinking in Theology and Biblical Studies Series (Brookfield, VT, and Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., forthcoming). The eschatological element of Pentecostalism has been treated in depth by D. William Faupel, *The Everlasting Gospel: The Significance of Eschatology in the Development of Pentecostal Thought*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplemental Series 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). My statement regarding the Pentecostal 'canon-within-the-canon' simply reflects the focus on Luke-Acts in Pentecostal scholarship, exegesis and theology, some of which I will reference in what follows.

⁴ For an excellent example of how Pentecostal and charismatic movements both learn from and instruct the Christian tradition, see Carter Lindberg's analysis of the Lutheran charismatic renewal in *The Third Reformation? Charismatic Movements and the Lutheran Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

⁵ Discussion of the marks are widely available, including Catholic treatments such as Hans Küng, *The Church*, tr. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), esp. 263-359, Francis A. Sullivan, S. J., *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), and Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1974), esp. pp. 115-29. An Eastern Orthodox perspective is to be found in Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, MA: Norland Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 58-68. A recent Protestant reappropriation is Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3: *Life in the Spirit* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), pp. 297-365. For Lutheran orthodoxy see Edmund Schlink, *The Coming Christ and the Coming Church* (Philadelphia:

Francis Sullivan points out, the marks have remained an undefined doctrine of faith in the sense that they have been asserted but never elaborated on dogmatically.⁶ And of course, newcomers to the block (such as the Pentecostals) might wonder why that is the case. The implicit response is that one asserts but does not define what seems self-evident. Two comments are in order. First, dogmatic pronouncements without dogmatic commentary invite reflection and understanding. This means that expositions of the meaning of the marks have been proffered throughout the history of the church. Inevitably, such expositions begin with the self-understanding of the patristic church, and rightly so as our own efforts below will seek to follow. Second, dogmatic pronouncement without clear definition frees the church to reflect, ponder, and explore such declarations. Thus, any attempt to understand the marks is an act of traditioning, a participation in the chorus of such efforts over the centuries. The church has and always will wrestle with the marks so long as self-understanding is sought. What follows is a conscious attempt to retrieve, reappropriate, and perhaps reconstruct, all of which are legitimate theological activities in this

case, so long as it is remembered that the last word has never been said (nor will be this side of the *eschaton*).

To set the stage for the following discussion, then, what did the early church mean in declaring the *ekklesia* to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic? Developments during the second through fourth centuries are pivotal to the development of ecclesiological self-understanding. As a minority group during this period of time, the church was a way of life marginal to the social, political, and economic mainstream. Not infrequently, the church was persecuted as a threat to the interests of society and the reigning government. Besides these pressures from outside, as it were, the church also confronted internal developments which raised questions about discerning truth from falsehood. Marcionism, Montanism, gnosticism, Donatism, etc., were movements that challenged the church to reflect on the apostolic tradition, on the place and role of charisma, on the meaning of morality and ethical rigour, on the nature, function and role of the bishop, and so on. Engaging Praxeas, Celsus, Sabellius, Arius, and their followers provided opportunities for further exploring what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all (Vincent of Lérins' *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*). Through all of these encounters, the church was forced to ask itself repeatedly: what is the nature of the true church of Jesus Christ, and how is such to be discerned?

The traditional marks of the

Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 119-30. Evangelical overviews include Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), pp. 609-14; and Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, and Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), pp. 853-72.

⁶ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, pp. 211-14.

church emerged amidst such developments. One might begin with the church as the one body of Christ, a body consisting of individual believers and local congregations, all of which constitute the body precisely because of the communion or fellowship they experience with each other both individually and congregationally.⁷ In so far as the churches remain in communion with each other, the church is one; in so far as individuals or congregations remove themselves from such communion, the result is not a division of the church (for those who remain in communion continue to reflect the unity of the body) but rather heresy—withdrawal from fellowship and separation such that one (whether individually or congregationally) no longer can be considered to be of the body of Christ. But what is the source of this communion? Is it not the apostolic witness? Further, how is this communion mediated? Perhaps through the bishops; perhaps through the sacraments; perhaps through the holiness brought about by the Holy Spirit who is the breath of life of the body. Finally, what is the extent of this communion? Is it not to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), to all who actually are in communion with the body of believers?

The underlying concern, as the above shows, is that of discerning

true from false churches—the real body of Christ from what is not the body of Christ. Seen in this light, it is clear that each of the marks presupposes and mutually defines the others. Holiness marks the character of the church as called out and consecrated to Christ and to the work of the kingdom of God. Catholicity contrasts with sectarianism (thus opposing, factionalism, heresies and heretics) and partiality (thus opposing regionalism and elitist claims such as those made by the Donatists during the middle of the third century). Apostolicity points to the authority of the church, her ministry, scriptures, sacraments, teachings, etc., built as she is on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). Presupposition, however, does not mean subordination. Each of the marks is intrinsic to the church's self-understanding of its nature and definition. To dispense with or subject one to any of the others is to undermine the rest. Apostolicity is the source of ecclesiality. Catholicity is the extent of ecclesiality. Holiness is the means of ecclesiality. Unity is the fact or reality of ecclesiality.

In one sense, what I hope to accomplish in this paper—re-reading the marks of the church from a pneumatological (and charismological) perspective—is nothing new. As Yves Congar points out in his own efforts to develop a pneumatological ecclesiology, 'However far we go back in the sequence of confessions of faith or creeds, we find the article

⁷ So long as we remember that one can begin with any of the other marks and make the same argument with the remaining three. Thus, the church as the one body of Christ is holy, catholic (or universal) and apostolic. Or, the church that is holy is united, catholic, and apostolic. Or, the church that is catholic is united, holy, and apostolic. Or, the church that is apostolic is united, holy and catholic.

on the Church linked to that on the Holy Spirit'.⁸ Thus the Nicene-Constantinopolitan (381) creed reads: 'We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.' The church is the work of the Spirit. The sending of the Spirit, as at the day of Pentecost, resulted in the creation of the church. Thus ecclesiology has always been linked to the third article of the creed, and Congar himself goes on to treat the traditional marks of the church in light of the Spirit who 'animates the Church'.⁹ Congar's pneumatological approach within the Catholic framework will be compared and contrasted with the Pentecostal pneumatological ecclesiology that is outlined in what follows. This is an especially appropriate exercise given that the focus during the third quinquennium of the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue (1985-1989) had a pneumatological ecclesiology as one of its guid-

ing themes.¹⁰

The Church as One (and being made One)

In Congar's discussion, the Holy Spirit is the principle of unity in the church. This is fleshed out in three ways. First, the Spirit is not one because of the church, but vice versa. (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4). The Spirit is the personal reality who makes many individuals into a community of persons. The Spirit is the source of unity amidst diversity, plurality, and difference. Yet such unity does not mean uniformity precisely because the Spirit's unifying power enables the integrity of each one amidst the many. Second, while Christ is the author of the church and the head of the body, the Spirit is 'the subject who brings about everything that depends on grace', and is therefore 'the supreme and transcendent effective personality of the Church'—what the Church fathers called the 'soul of the Church'.¹¹ Thus the church is the one body of Christ, infused with the life of Christ through the Spirit. Lastly, the unity of the church is understood concretely in the everyday lives of believers. Here, the Spirit is the love that is poured out into hearts, resulting in solidarity and practical love (1 Cor. 13:4-5).

In the background of Congar's exposition is the spectre of Roman Catholic self-understanding. In that framework, Rome represents the unity of the church, of the episco-

⁸ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Vol. II: 'He is Lord and Giver of Life', tr. David Smith (New York: The Seabury Press, and London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), p. 5.

⁹ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Part One. Thomas Oden puts it plainly: 'To say the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic is to confess the Holy Spirit as the one who unites, cleanses, and sends the church to the whole world' (*Systematic Theology*, 3:297).

¹⁰ See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat: Pneumatology in Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1972-1989)*, Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 42 (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 1998), esp. pp. 324-27.

¹¹ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:19-20.

pate, the sacraments, the liturgy, the teaching ministry, and so on. As Congar acknowledges, this unity in Roman Catholic Christianity possesses less uniformity than is usually realized since the accent lies on the interiority of the Spirit's life and presence in the church—as the 'soul of the Church'—and less on the exterior manifestations of the Spirit's work. At the same time, it is also undeniable that the diversity of Roman Catholic Christianity finds its cohesion and union in the bishop of Rome. Arguably, any visible unity of the *ekklesia* as might exist is located primarily in the Petrine office: 'full communion means the collegial unity of the heads of the local churches; namely, the bishops, with the Bishop of Rome who exercises the primacy'.¹² Here, the Catholic claim regarding the papacy stands in some ways as a scandal of particularity in the ecumenical church's self-understanding.

Pentecostals certainly would affirm the unity of the church.¹³ They would deny, however, that any one episcopate can adequately represent that unity. Rather, 'Pentecostals tend to view denominations as more or less

legitimate manifestations of the one, universal Church'.¹⁴ Emphasis is thereby placed first and foremost on a spiritual reality that is never fully visible in the concrete structures of space-time. Yet such emphasis on spiritual unity is deceiving if the connotations are that the Pentecostal understanding is abstract and devoid of concrete aspects. Because ecclesial unity is experienced in the fellowship of those who confess Jesus as Lord by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3), such unity is eschatological on the one hand, but also supremely particularistic, perhaps even in an incarnational or sacramental sense, on the other.¹⁵

By sacramental, I do not mean as pertaining specifically to the mediation of salvific grace through, for example, baptism or the eucharistic meal. Rather, I follow the idea that Pentecostals are convinced that the Spirit who resides within and presides over the church is the same Spirit who 'anointed Jesus of

¹² 'Final Report of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982),' §48, in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 (1990), p. 105.

¹³ For Pentecostal reflections on the unity of the Church from an Assemblies of God perspective, see Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., 'Pentecostals and Visible Church Unity,' *One World* (January-February, 1994), pp. 11-14; from the Wesleyan-Holiness trajectory of Pentecostalism, see R. Hollis Gause (Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee), *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1980), pp. 105-14.

¹⁴ 'Final Report of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1985-1989),' §34,

in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 (1990), p. 124. For Pentecostal exposition and commentary on this notion, see Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, pp. 314-23. Kärkkäinen rightly notes that this concession by the Pentecostal representatives to the dialogue obscures the fact that up until recently, most Pentecostals have understood themselves as members not so much of 'denominations,' but of 'movements.' Ecclesial unity thereby has a more personal, spiritual and denominational flavor.

¹⁵ On the importance of sacramentality to ecclesiology, see Simon Chan, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 112-21. Chan, by the way, is an Assemblies of God minister who is addressing, in this book, a broadly evangelical (including Pentecostal and charismatic) audience.

¹⁶ All scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

Nazareth with...power' (Acts 10:38)¹⁶. Furthermore, the Spirit is truly encountered and manifest palpably and tangibly in the life of the church—e.g., through signs, wonders, tongues, healings, the shout, the dance, and so on. So to that extent, the reality of the Spirit is mediated through the particularly embodied experiences of the community of saints.

Thus the unity of the church comes about through the eschatological work of the Spirit: 'And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance' (Acts 2:4, my emphasis). There is, therefore, a unique sort of Pentecostal sacramentality at work, a sacramental logic which does acknowledge the Spirit's being made present and active through the materials of the phenomenal world, but which widens the scope of such to include the materiality of personal embodiment and congregational life.¹⁷ The Word made flesh and the Spirit breathing and making the word real in and through the community of saints are both the one work of the triune God.

¹⁷ On this point, see Frank Macchia, 'Tongues as a Sign: Toward a Sacramental Understanding of Pentecostal Experience,' *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 15:1 (1993), pp. 61-76, who builds on the work of the Catholic charismatic theologian, Simon Tugwell, 'The Speech-Giving Spirit,' in Walter Hollenweger, et al., *New Heaven? New Earth?: An Encounter with Pentecostalism* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1976), pp. 119-60. Cf. also the chapter on 'The Holy Spirit and Unity,' in Paul McPartlan, *Sacrament of Salvation: An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 78-96, which is an excellent overview of the emergence of an ecumenical and sacramental ecclesiology intrinsically connected with pneumatology.

Such an account of ecclesial unity as both spiritual and embodied undergirds the distinctively Pentecostal notion of unity in diversity.¹⁸ This is not, however, for diversity's sake, but for the sake of the reconciliation of a broken creation. Pentecostals also sense the pain of disunity and separation. Ecumenically conscious Pentecostals would agree with Gerhard Lohfink who calls disunity the church's 'deepest wound'.¹⁹ But how is such disunity to be overcome? Many Pentecostals have recognized the enormity of the problem and appealed to the eschatological Spirit as the one who mediates visible disunity into invisible unity. Or, perhaps the confession of the unity of the church should also include the confession of the disunity of the church in a manner similar to acknowledging God as present and yet hidden, or understanding the Spirit to represent the divine presence as well as the Shekinah that is absent.²⁰ Either would be a rhetorical move symptomatic of an attitude of resignation

¹⁸ On the beginnings of a Pentecostal explication of unity in diversity in the body of Christ, see Jean-Jacques Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play: Towards a Charismatic Theology*, tr. John Bowden (1994; reprint, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 189-92, and Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, pp. 311-13.

¹⁹ Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God*, tr. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 290-308.

²⁰ Thus Ephraim Radner writes that 'the "absence of the Paraclete" from within the Church ought to be constitutive of historical pneumatology (our understanding of the Holy Spirit's life in time) and that Christian division and scriptural obscurity are themselves pneumatic realities of the historical present' (*The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 27). Radner's book plays out

before the truly monumental task of experiencing the unity for which Jesus prayed.

I will return later to the ecumenical dimension of Christian unity. For the moment, however, I want to focus on the paradigm of unity-in-diversity as reconciliation and how that is brought about through the pneumatic and charismatic intuitions at the centre of both Pentecostal experience and the spirituality of Luke-Acts. My suggestion would be that the Pentecostal experience at Azusa Street which overcame gender, ethnic, racial, and socio-economic barriers present in American life at the turn of the twentieth century simply re-embodied the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and in the life of the early church. The Pentecostal experience, then and now, brings sons and daughters together, menservants and maidservants (Acts 2:17-18)—no small feat for a world ruled by patriarchy. It binds Samaritans, Ethiopians, and other Gentiles together with Jews—again, a major achievement in a world full of ethnic and racial hostilities. It reconciles

into one body those who have and those who do not through various means, whether it be the securing of justice (as in the case of Zacchaeus in Lk. 19:1-10), the redistribution of goods (e.g., Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37, and the widows in Acts 6:1), or the affirmation of the ministry of the well to do among those less well off (e.g., Dorcas in Acts 9:36-43, and Lydia in Acts 16:13-15). The case of the Ethiopian eunuch is particularly noteworthy in this regard (Acts 8:27ff). Not only does the inclusion in the body of Christ of this high-ranking official of a foreign government cut across ethnic, socio-economic, and political lines, but it also emphatically de-marginalizes those who for various reasons were previously barred from the assembly of the LORD (in this case because of emasculation; cp. Deut. 23:1 and Is. 56:4-5).

It is no wonder that the Pentecostal movement of the early twentieth century has since exploded across the world. While beginning, arguably, as a movement among the socially marginalized of American society,²¹ it was and is driven by a spiritual dynamic that erupted in part through the convergence of a diversity of traditions, perspectives, and

the motif of the 'pneumatological abandonment of the Church' which is precisely the Church of Jesus Christ, himself abandoned by the Father's sacrifice of love (pp. 342-43). Yet, Radner needs to follow his thesis through to the new life breathed into Jesus through the Spirit of holiness who also breathes into Jesus' body. The tension between death and resurrection, or with regard to the point at hand, between disunity and unity, must be played out in an eschatological, and therefore thoroughgoing pneumatological, sense. On this point, see D. Lyle Dabney, *Die Kenosis des Geistes: Kontinuität zwischen Schöpfung und Erlösung in Werk des Heiligen Geistes* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997).

²¹ This is the argument of Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

²² Thus Walter Hollenweger's argument for at least five roots of early twentieth century Pentecostalism representing broad streams of the Christian tradition: African-American, Catholic, Wesleyan Holiness, Keswick Reformed, and ecumenical; see his *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997).

experiences.²² Unsurprisingly, those familiar with the origins and expansion of Pentecostalism acknowledge its reality as impossible apart from the ongoing and eschatological work of the Spirit of God. In the meanwhile, those who have continued in obedience to the Spirit's leading and have been sensitive to the church's calling toward unity in Christian faith have also recognized the ecumenical potential of Pentecostal-charismatic spiritually and participated in the reconciling work of the Spirit through the later charismatic and Third Wave renewal movements.²³ Of course, given human fallibility and sinfulness, even the unity of Pentecostal faith and experience was insufficient to keep the movement from splintering into innumerable factions. Ongoing repentance and acts of reconciliation have been and should continue to be normative, as expressed by the dissolution of the all white Pentecostal Fellowship of North America and its reconstitution to include black denominations as the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches of North America at a historic meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, in October of 1994.²⁴

All of this does not deny that Pentecostals affirm spiritual unity over

institutional or structured unity. Yet such spiritual unity is not devoid of concrete manifestations across the spectrum of Christian life, but is, rather, a unity of the Spirit that includes reconciliation and healing in the same Spirit.²⁵ And such unity is to be experienced in the Spirit who brings those otherwise separated together in Jesus Christ in anticipation of the eschatological union before the throne of God. For Pentecostals, then, the church is one even while she is being made one.

The Church as Holy (and being made Holy)

This eschatological emphasis is most pronounced in Congar in his discussion of the holiness of the church. For Congar, the Spirit is both the principle of the church's holiness as such and the sanctifying agent of individuals in the church. This is because the church is the temple or habitation of a holy God, joined as one with God through the mediatorship of the Son who by the incarnation was betrothed to be married to his bride, the church, and now awaits consummation of this wedding at the marriage supper of the Lamb. The Spirit thus indwells the church as the first fruits or down payment of this eschatological event. Meanwhile, however, the church struggles as a collection of sinners even while it is

²³ Cf. Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, pp. 63-73, and Daniel E. Albrecht, 'Pentecostal Spirituality: Ecumenical Potential and Challenge,' *Cyberjournal for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* [<http://www.pctii.org/cybertab.html>], 2 (1997).

²⁴ Cf. Frank Macchia, 'From Azusa to Memphis: Evaluating the Racial Reconciliation Dialogue among Pentecostals,' *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17 (1995), pp. 208-18; this entire issue of the journal is devoted to this Memphis Reconciliation, as it has been called.

²⁵ Cf. the discussion of the church as a reconciling and healing community by Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplemental Series* 21 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 104-06.

declared and is working out its identity as a community of saints—including past, present, and future members of the body of Christ—through participation in the love of the Spirit. The holiness of the church is therefore not a human accomplishment, but a gift, actually and eschatologically, of the pouring out of the Spirit into the body of Christ.

Pentecostals would resonate especially with the dynamism evident in Congar's reflections on the holiness of the church. Thus much overall agreement, among other more minor differences, could be reached between Pentecostals and Catholics on the importance and connectedness of holiness, repentance and ministry.²⁶ Holiness, in other words, is not so much a static category pertinent to Christian identity as it is an energetic, potent and charismatic reality experienced in Christian life. This is especially the case among (but certainly not limited to) those Pentecostals within the Wesleyan Holiness trajectory of the movement who emphasize both the now-and-the-not-yet dynamic of holiness as marking authentic ecclesiality. The Pentecostal perspective thus dovetails well with Thomas Oden's statement that 'the chief proof of the church's holiness, ironically, is that it is found among sinners, redeeming, reaching out, healing, and sanctifying'.²⁷

This said, it is also certainly the case that Pentecostalism includes its

fair share of legalists who understand holiness in a fairly static or essentialist manner. There are also, unfortunately, too many examples of Pentecostals who trade on the gifts of the Spirit, but lack the fruits thereof. In so far as this is the case, however, Pentecostals agree with Congar and the church universal that holiness is, finally, an eschatological mark to be brought about as the Spirit transforms the body of Christ into the image of Jesus. In the meanwhile, however, no Pentecostal (much less Christian) can ignore his or her identity within a community of sinners called to and transformed toward saintliness.

What then might Pentecostals have to contribute to the broader ecclesial understanding of the church as holy? Perhaps through a pneumatologically robust notion of sanctifying transformation. Hans Küng's discussion of the church's holiness highlights the fact that holiness refers first of all to the divine nature, and therefore carries the sense of being set apart or consecrated for the service of God. Rather than pointing to human activity, 'what matters is the sanctifying will and word of God'.²⁸ From the Pentecostal perspective, the Spirit sets members of the body of Christ apart from the world for the work of the kingdom of God. More specifically, of course, the Spirit clothes the believer with 'power from on high' in order that he or she might witness to Jesus and the kingdom 'in

²⁶ 'Final Report of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1985-1989)', §102-08, in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 (1990), pp. 138-39.

²⁷ Oden, *Systematic Theology*, 3:319.

²⁸ Küng, *The Church*, pp. 324-30; quote from p. 324.

Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (cp. Lk. 24:49 & Acts 1:8).

There should be more, however, to the witness of the Spirit-filled believer than this dimension of verbal testimony that Pentecostals have long called attention to. More recently, Pentecostals are also observing the intrinsic connection between the kerygmatic witness of the saints and the calling of the church toward participation in the prophetic activity of socio-ethical engagement. The church is, after all, not only a royal priesthood, but also what Roger Stronstad calls a 'prophethood of believers'.²⁹ Luke-Acts shows that Jesus is the eschatological prophet who is mighty in word and deed—indeed, the paradigm for the earliest Christians, including Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Agabus, Peter, and Paul. And, among other things, prophets are called not only to 'preach the good news to the poor...', to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,' but also to 'set at liberty those who are oppressed [and] to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' (Lk. 4:18-19). Thus Jesus' prophetic words and deeds are redemptive regarding the structures of oppression—e.g., the parables of the persistent widow and the Pharisee and tax collector, his raising the

only son of the widow of Nain from the dead, his acceptance of the sinful woman, his treatment of women, his attitudes toward Samaritans, the transformation of Zacchaeus, and so on—even as are the words and actions of the early Christian community—e.g., whether that be the communitarian re-structuring whereby 'all who believed were together and had all things in common' (Acts 2:44), caring for widows otherwise socially vulnerable, the provision of famine relief, and so on. These prophetic actions, it could be argued, are part and parcel of the work of divinely consecrated, anointed and appointed ones—the community of prophetic saints—through whom God 'has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he sent empty away' (Lk. 1:52-53).

It is important to emphasize that the key to this accomplishment of divine restructuring lies not in the word and work of prophets in and of themselves, but in the transformative power of the eschatological Spirit who comes upon them. As Matthias Wenk has recently pointed out, it is precisely the work of the Spirit not only to sanctify or consecrate believers apart for the prophetic word and work of the kingdom, but also to accomplish such transformation in

²⁹ Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 16 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). Stronstad has long been academic dean of Western Pentecostal Bible College in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

³⁰ Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power: The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement series 19 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Wenk is a Pentecostal pastor and part-time lecturer at the Theologisch-Diakonisches Seminar Aarau in Hindelbank, Switzerland.

and through them.³⁰ Prophetically inspired speech is the medium through which the divine intent is made manifest and the believing community is transformed. The prophetic message of John the Baptist, for example, is the means through which God addresses Israel, the tax collectors, and the soldiers, and which produces in them repentance (Luke 3:1-14). Yet, it was also a message which left a mark on the messenger himself since John could not be a voice proclaiming in the wilderness without having his home in the desert. Spirit-inspired speech thus has transformative effects on both the speaker and the audience.³¹

Elsewhere, the Spirit-inspired speeches in the infancy narratives (Luke 1-2) herald the new, restoring work of God that is about to transpire through Jesus (Luke) and the believing community (Acts). Jesus' ministry of reconstituting a liberated community is itself anointed by the Spirit of God (Luke 4:18-19). Luke's version of what we've come to identify as the Lord's prayer (11:2-4) is the means through which the people of God ask for and receive the life-transforming and community-forming power of the Spirit of God (11:13). Pentecost (Acts 2) is a liberative and sanctifying event of the Spirit that results in the formation of the new messianic community (2:42-47). As already mentioned above,

throughout volume two of Luke-Acts, the Spirit's speech-acts level out socio-economic, ethnic, and gender differences, even while these same speech-acts identify, mark, and guide the people of God. Wenk's exposition thus highlights the restoring, reconciling, and sanctifying work of the Spirit of God that brings human beings into relationship with God and with each other. It turns out that my listening to what the Spirit is saying includes my being open to being transformed by what is said, and not just myself, but all those who claim to be of the Spirit of God and are claimed by that same Spirit.

At the same time, rejected prophecy is not only a rejection of the prophet, or the word of the prophet, but also of the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God. Wenk is able to show, using sources from the intertestamental period, that what previous scholars had claimed was the cessation of prophecy during this time is perhaps better understood as reflecting the unwillingness of the people of Israel to hear, engage, or be transformed by the word of God. In other words, it may not be—either during the intertestamental centuries, the early Christian period, or since—that the Spirit of God has ceased to speak and act; rather, a hard-hearted and hard-of-hearing people have refused to accept the message, the messenger (the inspired prophet), or God (cp. Acts 7:51 and 28:25-28). Arguably then, prophecy never ceases; it is, instead, denied, ignored, neglected, or rejected by the unfaith-

³¹ Congar does mention that so long as the Spirit of God continues to speak through divinely appointed prophets today, then 'the proposal of an objective revelation...implies a corresponding "spirit of revelation" in the subjects who are to receive it' (*I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:30).

ful community resisting the purposes of God and the transformative work of the Spirit of God.³²

Clearly, Christian holiness can no longer be understood in purely individualistic terms. Rather, the *rhema* word of the Spirit of God is formative and transformative, and that precisely for individuals-in-community. The entire church, not to mention the communities of Pentecostal believers around the world, is hereby challenged by the fact that the words of the Spirit go beyond conveying information to transforming those hearers open to what the Spirit is saying and doing. The holiness of the church thus marks not the accomplishments of its members, but the authentic presence and activity of the Spirit of God directed toward the eschatological kingdom when the saints will be finally and fully free from sin and its effects. In this sense, the Spirit of holiness both sets the *ekklesia* apart and transforms her toward the image of Jesus. For Pentecostals, then, the church is not only holy but also being made holy.

The Church as Catholic (and being made Catholic)

The Roman Catholic vision of Congar is informed by the particular and yet universal mission of Jesus (the one anointed by the Holy Spirit) and his followers (anointed also by the same Spirit) to many peoples, tongues, tribes and nations. The church is thereby charismatic,

reflecting the diversity of gifts to these peoples, tongues, tribes and nations by the Spirit. Herein lies the catholicity or universality of the church. It is, after all, the Spirit who brings about the church's universality in and through the illumination of Christ in the whole counsel of the Scriptures, the teaching tradition and ministry of the church, and the liturgy (including the celebration of the Eucharist). More precisely, it is the Spirit who inspires the accommodation or contextualization of the gospel message in the church's missionary work throughout history precisely by enabling the discernment and interpretation of the various places, times, and events in which the gospel is planted and through which it unfolds and bears fruit. In all of these, it is better to understand the catholicity of the church eschatologically, after the eschatological Spirit who continues to accomplish, shape and form the church catholic.³³

Three comments, among others, can be made by way of a Pentecostal response. First, Pentecostals would be the first to say 'Amen!' to the Catholic definition of ecclesial catholicity as signifying the whole faith (fullness or plenitude) belonging to the whole body of Christ for the whole world (a universal vocation). The whole faith, of course, is none other than the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ (to be further discussed below). The whole body includes all who confess 'Jesus is Lord' by the

³² Wenk, *Community-Forming Power*, pp. 112-18 and pp. 122-33.

³³ In what follows, I distinguish between Catholic (capitalized) referring to communion with the bishop of Rome and catholic (not capitalized) referring to the universality of the *ekklesia*.

Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). The whole world refers not only to the eschatological gathering of peoples, tongues, tribes and nations (Rev. 5:9b, 7:9, 10:11, 13:7, 17:15, etc.), but also the continually expanding kingdom of God (cf. the parables of Mt. 13).

Yet along these lines, Pentecostals would be hesitant to affirm catholicity in the sense of universality at the expense of particularity in the sense of locality. Here, Pentecostal charismology informs Pentecostal ecclesiology and vice-versa. The church as charismatic flows from the fact that the manifestation of the gifts through each member serves the common good (1 Cor. 12:4-7). Each member's gifting is essential precisely because together they constitute the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27). Arguably, individual members constitute local congregations which combine, finally, as the church catholic. All the more important, Pentecostals are quick to insist on remembering the particularity of local congregations and of individual members in understanding both the charismatic giftedness and the ecclesial constitution of the church catholic.

This leads, second, to a consideration of the interdependence of the notions of catholicity (universality) and unity. If Catholicism tends to err on the side of universality, Pentecostalism does so on the side of locality. Therefore, global Pentecostalism has not generally been as concerned with ecumenism at either structural or institutional levels. But what then about the ecumenical movement?

More specifically, what about the relationship between the churches and the Catholic Church, and vice-versa? Is it the case that denominationalism and congregationalism are true expressions of New Testament Christianity as Protestants in general and Pentecostals in particular believe? Hans Küng has raised the issues forcefully: Is it really 'feasible in the light of the New Testament to regard these divisions as an organic development? ... Is it not simply an easy way out of our obligation to work for unity here and now, to bring in eschatological fulfilment? ... We should not justify these divisions, any more than we justify sin, but "suffer" them as a dark enigma, an absurd, ridiculous, tolerable yet intolerable fact of life, that is contrary both to the will of God and the good of mankind.' More importantly, 'The Churches, apart from the so-called "Catholic Church", cannot achieve the necessary unity nor the necessary catholicity of the Church, without first sorting out their relationship to the "Catholic Church," from which directly or indirectly they all stem, and making their peace with her'.³⁴

As before, the initial Pentecostal response would be to affirm Congar's intuition that the church's catholicity must be understood eschatologically.³⁵ Miroslav Volf,

³⁴ Küng, *The Church*, pp. 281, 283, 310.

³⁵ For an exegetical argument for the early church's understanding of being the people God because of their experience of the eschatological Spirit, see Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2000), pp. 121-46.

himself an evangelical theologian with deep Pentecostal roots, puts it this way: 'The catholicity of the entire people of God is the ecclesial dimension of the eschatological fullness of salvation for the entirety of created reality.'³⁶ In this sense, the catholicity of the church cannot finally be separated from the universality of the kingdom, and both will be manifest fully on that day when the kings of the earth bring the glory and honour of the nations into the city of the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:22-26). This means that Pentecostals would affirm catholicity both as a present reality and as an eschatological hope: the church is catholic and being made catholic.

Now, while this eschatological dimension of catholicity should certainly not be denied, yet the present ecumenical situation continues to beg for a more substantive Pentecostal response. Perhaps one way to approach this question from a Pentecostal perspective is to inquire into the experiential reality of global Pentecostalism. What is it that binds South African, Korean, North American, Scandinavian, Malaysian, etc., Pentecostals together? Without discounting socio-economic explanations of this mutuality,³⁷ it could also be argued that the universality of the Pentecostal community is locatable

in large part in the fact that Pentecostalism is first and foremost an ecumenical experience rather than an ecumenical ecclesiology. The ties that bind Pentecostals together around the world are their experiences of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. It is not that Pentecostals are not concerned about Christian unity. Rather, Pentecostals experience Christian unity precisely through the universality of the Spirit's presence and activity that enables the confession of Jesus' Lordship amidst the peculiarly Pentecostal congregations and liturgies.

This universal catholicity raises, thirdly and finally, the means of the church's missionary witness and endeavour. Here again, Pentecostals would affirm Congar's observation that the whole gospel belonging to the whole body for the whole world means that the world receives the gospel in its own idiom, cultural space, and historical time.³⁸ From the very beginning, Pentecostalism has been a missionary movement that has assumed that the outpouring of the Spirit resulting in diverse tongues reveals the heart of God for the evangelization of the whole world. More specifically, from the perspective of Pentecostal experience, the confession of Jesus as Lord is enabled by the Spirit to come forth

³⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 267.

³⁷ E.g., Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

³⁸ For a discussion of how the themes of mission, evangelization, and culture have played out in the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic dialogues, see Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Ad ultimum terrae: Evangelization, Proselytism, and Common Witness in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1990-1997)*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity, p. 117 (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

in many different tongues. On the day of Pentecost, Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Pontians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylans, Egyptians, Libyans, Cyreneans, Cretans, and Arabs all heard the wonders of God in their own languages (Acts 2:5-11). In the words of Vatican II, '(At Pentecost) that union (of all peoples in the catholicity of faith) was (prefigured) by the Church of the new covenant, which speaks all tongues, which lovingly understands and accepts all tongues and which overcomes the divisiveness of Babel' (*Ad Gentes divinitus*, 4). Peter clearly understood this event to be a fulfilment of the prophet Joel whereby

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:16-18, in the NIV; cf. Joel 2:28ff)

This outpouring is understood by Pentecostals to have been reenacted at Azusa Street in the early twentieth century, and continued all the way through to the present via the charismatic renewal, Third Wave, and Toronto Blessing movements. Henry Pitt van Dusen long ago called Pentecostalism the 'third force in Christendom' besides the Catholic and Protestant churches, anticipating perhaps the explosion of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity in the

non-western worlds of Latin America, Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.³⁹ Precisely because the good news belongs to all precisely in their own language, culture, and context, Pentecostal missiology has therefore developed principles of indigenization whereby the message of the gospel and the work of the Spirit is accommodated, acculturated, and assimilated into local contexts.⁴⁰ The ruling assumption is that the gospel belongs to all peoples and that therefore reception of that gospel is better facilitated on their own indigenous terms.

This raises, of course, the issue of syncretism as a possible outcome of indigenization. How is the church catholic to recognize that elements of her confession of Jesus as Lord have been compromised, and that precisely through the translation of the gospel into the language and idiom of the receiving culture? Put positively, how is the church to ensure that her eschatological catholicity is continuous with, rather than discontinuous from, the ecclesial catholicity by which she is marked? This is a concern which is in parallel with the problem of the tares cohabitating with the wheat in the ecclesial kingdom.

³⁹ H. P. van Dusen, 'The Third Force in Christendom,' *Life* (9 June 1958), pp. 113-24; more accurate, perhaps, would be to identify the Pentecostal stream as the fourth in Christendom, besides Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

⁴⁰ In this regard, see Melvin Hodges, *A Theology of the Church and Its Mission: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1979); Paul Pomerville, *The Third Force in Missions: A Pentecostal Contribution to Contemporary Mission Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985); and most recently, Julie C. Ma, *When the Spirit Meets the Spirits: Pentecostal Ministry among the Kankana-ey Tribe in the Philippines*, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity 118 (New York and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000).

Confession of Jesus should not be equated with an empty 'Lord, Lord,' prophetic intensity, the exorcism of demons in Jesus' name, nor even the appearance of miracles (Mt. 7:22), all of which are distinguishing features of Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality. So, Pentecostals have to be wary even about the appearances of preaching the gospel 'in demonstration of the Spirit and power' (1 Cor. 2:4) since such signs might well be misleading. How then is the church catholic to be discerned? Perhaps precisely by discerning the *ekklesia* as not only catholic, but also one, holy and apostolic. It is surely the case that only such a fourfold criterion is able to better identify the true church of Jesus Christ from a false one.

The Church as Apostolic (and being made Apostolic)

What does a Roman Catholic pneumatological approach to apostolicity look like in Congar? As with the marks of holiness and catholicity, the church apostolic is a gift of the Spirit and an eschatological task of coming into conformity with the apostolic message. The church apostolic is also, further, the means through which the mission of Christ is shared and carried out by the power of the Spirit. Crucial in this regard is the category of testimony whereby the message of the gospel is empowered by the Spirit through words and deeds, even to the point of death. Thus, 'the Spirit is also given to the

Church as its transcendent principle of faithfulness',⁴¹ through whom apostolicity of service, witness, suffering and struggle is disclosed and confirmed. This apostolicity derives first from the apostles themselves, but then appends itself to the *laos* of God in general and the function of the bishops more specifically. The latter represent the ongoing communion of the people of God with the apostolic witness, and thereby with the Father and his Son. Congar therefore goes so far as to say that 'it is, after all, possible to speak of an apostolic succession in the case of all believers, but only in the wider context of the faithful transmission of faith'.⁴² In each act of transmission of the gospel, from that of the *laos* of God to the magisterium, the Spirit is the one who preserves the indefectibility of the church 'so that error will not ultimately prevail (see Mt. 16:18)'.⁴³

With regard to apostolicity, the early twentieth century Pentecostals were driven by the conviction that theirs was the restoration of apostolic faith and practice. More recently, the international Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue agreed that genuine Christian ministry 'lives in continuity with the New Testament apostles and their proclamation, and with the apostolic church. A primary manifestation of this is to be found in fidelity to the apostolic teaching.' The disagreement, of course, lies in the Catholic insistence on episcopal succession focused primarily on the

⁴¹ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:43.

⁴² Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:45.

⁴³ Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 2:46.

Petrine ministry, over and against the Pentecostal emphasis on the Spirit's presence and anointing power providing the endorsement of apostolic faith and ministry.⁴⁴ Are Pentecostals and Roman Catholics, however, as far apart on this issue in light of Congar's discussion?

In a recent paper, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, a Finnish Pentecostal now teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, proposed a 'conciliar understanding of apostolicity' for consideration by his fellow Pentecostal theologians.⁴⁵ This includes seven aspects which serve minimally as a starting point for Pentecostal-Roman Catholic discussion:

- apostolicity is first and foremost continuity with the faith of the apostles and of the NT Church
- charismatic life and worship are indispensable components of apostolicity
- the missionary proclamation of the gospel is at the heart of apostolicity

⁴⁴ 'Final Report of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982),' §88-90, quote from §88, in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 (1990), p. 112. For details of the discussion of apostolicity and apostolic succession which permeated the third quinquennium of the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue, see Kärkkäinen, *Spiritus ubi vult spirat*, pp. 332-58.

⁴⁵ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'Pentecostalism and the Claim for Apostolicity: An Essay in Ecumenical Ecclesiology,' paper presented to the annual meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, Oral Roberts University, 8-10 March 2001, and published in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25:4 (October 2001), pp. 323-336. Kärkkäinen does mention in the first footnote to this paper that its basic argument will be published in slightly different format as 'Apostolicity of Free Churches: A Contradiction in Terms or an Ecumenical Breakthrough,' *Pro Ecclesia* (forthcoming, 2001).

- the Scriptures are the norm of apostolicity

- apostolicity being a dynamic concept means that the issue is one of life and vitality rather than that of juridics

- apostolicity focuses on the whole people of God, not only on clergy or authority

- apostolicity must be regarded as a 'heavily pneumatological concept'.

Is it the case that Kärkkäinen is separated from Congar by a chasm? Would Roman Catholics agree on the Scriptures as the norm of apostolicity or insist rather that it is the *primary* norm (*prima scriptura*)? In what ways would Catholics qualify the levelling out of the laity and the clergy in this proposal? Let me respond briefly by looking at the nature of apostolicity and the question of apostolic succession.

First, let us focus attention on the nature of apostolicity in its original context. The twelve were the initially 'sent ones' whose mission was to baptize and make disciples of all nations, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins, and to witness to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ (cp. Mt. 28:19-20 and Lk. 24:45-49). Clearly, however, the first two generations of Christians did not understand the apostolic commission to be limited only to the twelve, nor the apostolic message to be confined to the original disciples. Certainly, Paul, Andronicus and Junias (Rom. 16:7), Silas and Timothy (cp. 1 Thess. 1:1 and 2:6), and James the brother of Jesus (Gal. 1:17) were all recognized as sent ones who fulfilled the apostolic func-

tion. Paul himself notes in that signs, wonders and mighty works (miracles) were signs of true apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12).

Pentecostals have therefore generally understood the ongoing apostolic office or function (1 Cor. 12:28 and Eph. 4:11) to be the Spirit-empowered ministry of missionizing, evangelizing, church planting, and discipling. From the Pentecostal perspective, this fulfils all the early Christian requirements, including the charismatic components of authentic apostolicity identified by Paul.⁴⁶ And, of course, how else would Pentecostals understand apostolicity except pneumatologically and charismatically? If in fact apostolicity follows the original twelve in giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus from the dead (cf. Acts 4:33), then how is such to be accomplished in succeeding generations except by the same Spirit? Outside of the five hundred plus who saw the resurrected Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:5-6), later generations of believers cannot give this kind of first hand witness to the resurrection. Yet witness is certainly given, and that precisely in and through the Holy Spirit who both raised Jesus from the dead and has been given to indwell and

empower the believer (cp. Rom. 8:11 and Acts 1:8).⁴⁷

It is for this reason that Harold Hunter's distinctions between, apostolic succession, apostolic teaching, and apostolic restoration are important.⁴⁸ Building on Lesslie Newbigin's paradigm of ecclesial order, ecclesial faith, and ecclesial experience, Hunter notes the emphasis on order and apostolic succession among episcopal churches, that of faith and apostolic teaching among Reformation churches, and that of experience and apostolic restoration among Pentecostal and charismatic type churches. Clearly each communion of churches under these categories understands the other two aspects to be most adequately understood and practised within their own account of apostolicity. Equally clearly, there are socio-historical reasons why each communion has emphasized one to the neglect of the others in ways that have retarded a fully healthy ecclesiality. Yet the question remains: how do all three dimensions fit together under the one category of apostolicity?

It is here that the claims especially of the papacy to apostolic succession

⁴⁶ 'Classical Pentecostals find an exercise of apostolic ministry wherever through the preaching of God's Word churches are founded, persons and communities are converted to Jesus Christ, and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are in evidence'; see the 'Final Report of the International Roman Catholic/Pentecostal Dialogue (1977-1982)', §79, in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 12:2 (1990), p. 111.

⁴⁷ This portrayal of apostolicity is consistent with the Johannine witness as well. There, a convergence is found between Jesus' glorification and the giving

of the Spirit on the one hand, and Jesus' returning to the Father and the accomplishment of greater work than his by the disciples on the other. The marks of bona fide apostolicity are intimately connected, then with the gift of the Holy Spirit (cp. Jn. 7:39, 14:12, and 20:21-22).

⁴⁸ Harold D. Hunter, 'We are the Church: New Congregationalism—A Pentecostal Perspective,' in Jürgen Moltmann and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, Concilium 1996/3 (London: SCM Press, and Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. 17-21, esp. p. 18; Hunter is a member of the International Pentecostal Holiness Church.

may be most challenging. The majority of Pentecostals are not much concerned about their relationship to Roman Catholicism or the Vatican. Yet Roman Catholic charismatics are a nagging reminder that the Pentecostal experience cannot avoid dealing with the ecclesial implications of unity, catholicity and apostolicity, especially vis-à-vis the position and function of the bishop of Rome. Initially, Pentecostals might be tempted to point to the plurality of authorities even within the early church itself. There are not one but four gospels alongside a multitude of apostolic traditions—e.g., Paul's, James', Jude's, and so on. This, however, exacerbates all the tensions between the one and the many, unity and multiplicity, and exclusivity and inclusivity, germane to the discussion of the criteriology needed to discern the church as one, holy, and catholic. If such a move relativizes the authority of the pope, it also relativizes the Pentecostal claim to apostolic restoration as well.

It is here, perhaps, that the pneumatological and charismatic account of apostolicity provided by Pentecostals may contribute to the discussion. The first Jerusalem Council may point the way forward in this regard. The apostolic witness emerges from the convention only after much discussion and heated debate regarding the question of whether or not gentile believers needed to be circumcised. Appeal was made to the Scriptures (James quotes various sources in the Hebrew prophets in Acts 15:16-18), and to the apostolic experience (of

Peter's among Cornelius and the gentiles). Most important for the purposes at hand is the explanation provided by the apostolic council to the non-Jewish churches: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:...' (Acts 15:28).⁴⁹ Apostolic authority to retrieve, reappropriate, and reinterpret the Scripture in accordance with ecclesial experience is sanctioned, finally, by the charismatic leading of the Holy Spirit.

In so far as this is the case, how might Pentecostals come to grips with the claims to apostolicity as defined, symbolized, and constituted ecclesially in the Roman Catholic magisterium specifically and in other episcopal traditions (e.g., Eastern Orthodoxy) more generally? Here, Congar's willingness to locate the narrower sense of apostolic succession as technically connected with the bishop of Rome within the

⁴⁹ For Pentecostal readings of the Jerusalem council germane to this discussion of apostolic authority, see James B. Shelton (who teaches at Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma), 'Epistemology and Authority in the Acts of the Apostles: An Analysis and Test Case Study of Acts 15:1-29,' *The Spirit & Church* 2:2 (2000), pp. 231-47, and John Christopher Thomas (New Testament scholar at Church of God [Cleveland, Tennessee] Theological Seminary), 'Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: A Pentecostal Hermeneutic as Test Case,' in Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 108-22. Roman Catholic readings of Acts 15, naturally, tend to emphasize the communal dimension of discernment within the charismatically structured leadership of the church; see, on this point, Ladislav Orsy, *Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), pp. 15-18.

broader reality of how apostolic faith is actually transmitted may prove helpful in connecting to Pentecostal sensibilities. Whether or not Pentecostals feel acutely the need to come to grips with the papacy, especially in its present form, certainly they cannot ignore the fact that they have to make their peace with the Catholic tradition since 1500 years of this history is their own. But is it possible that some Pentecostals might be willing to go one step further? In so far as the magisterium is truly led by the eschatological Spirit to serve the body of Christ and to fulfil the task of the church, and in so far as Pentecostals (and other Christians more generally) can recognize such activity as being of the Spirit of God, is there any hindrance to Pentecostals recognizing the *provisional* authority of the pope (or the episcopate) both as a symbolic re-presentation (or even sacramental sign) of apostolic faith and practice and as an eschatological anticipation of the fullness of the apostolic message, the *pleroma* of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:11-13)?⁵⁰

The point, after all, is not that apostolicity resides in abstraction in the church, but that the apostolic message and witness is preserved authentically in ecclesial life and faith as directed toward the impending kingdom of God. How else would such preservation come about except pneumatologically? And, it is

perhaps only from a pneumatological and charismological perspective that the dichotomies between apostolic succession and restoration, between episcopal and congregational structures, between tradition as past and as presently instantiated, between councils/creeds and kerygmatic proclamation, etc., might be overcome.⁵¹ If that is the case, then the church is apostolic not only in terms of its foundation, its authority, and its message, but also with regard to its *telos* around the throne of God (Rev. 4-5).

Provisional Thoughts in Conclusion...

My intention in this paper is not to say something new about the traditional marks of the church. Rather, it should be understood as one contribution—albeit one deriving from a socio-historical location of modern North American Pentecostalism—to a pneumatologically framed ecclesiology which has had its advocates since the time of the early church, and is currently undergoing a revival of sorts. It also provides Pentecostals in general (and this one, particularly) the opportunity to render a dynamic and eschatological account of their experience of the Spirit. Re-reading marks of the church in this framework, then, the church is one even while it is being made one; the

⁵⁰ Evangelical theologians are also beginning to ask this same question as well; see, e.g., Clark Pinnock, 'Does Christian Unity Require Some Form of Papal Primacy?' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35:3-4 (1998), pp. 380-82.

⁵¹ As the Eastern Orthodox say, 'Tradition is a *charismatic*, not a historical, principle,' or 'the Councils were never regarded as a canonical institution, but rather as occasional *charismatic events*' (Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 47 and p. 96, italics orig.).

church is holy even while it is being made holy; the church is catholic even while it is being made catholic; the church is apostolic even while it is being given the fullness of apostolic faith. Finally, in so far as Pentecostalism and evangelicalism are related in any way, perhaps the foregoing also serves to provoke evangelical reflections on the nature of that relationship more specifically, and of both to the historical and ecu-

menical church in so far as the ecclesiological question is concerned. *Come Holy Spirit, breathe upon the Church...*⁵²

⁵² I express thanks to the editors of *The Pneuma Review* for allowing me to use some material from my reviews of Stronstad's and Wenk's books published in that journal. Also, many thanks to Glen Menzies of North Central University, Minneapolis, MN, who read and commented on this paper in short notice. Any defects that remain, of course, are my own.

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The Nature of the Church

Miroslav Volf

Keywords: Ecclesiology, mission, power, kingdom of God, grace, new creation, reconciliation, liberation, healing, poor

The Spirit and the Church

In the 2001 WEF General Assembly *Event Guide*, Jun Vencer described the central question for the sub-theme on the church in the following way:

What is the nature of the church and arising out of that nature, what would be our mission? After all, ecclesiology determines missiology. How is the church to live and function as a community of believers in the midst of a larger community whom the church is commissioned to reach for Christ? These are not new questions. What new formulations should be made that would input new developments? What new images would describe the churches today?

These are the questions and challenges that occupy us now.

What is the nature of the church? To answer this question you cannot look at the church simply as a social body, as if you were examining any social entity—a club, a corporation, a nation—to determine its nature. To answer the question about the nature of the church you must look beyond the church as a social body and examine the relation between the church and Jesus Christ. The New Testament uses many metaphors to describe this relationship. You are familiar with them: the church is the body—Christ is the head; the church is the bride—Christ is the bridegroom; the church is a servant—Christ is the Lord; the church is the company of the redeemed—Christ is the Redeemer. It is the *presence of Christ* that makes the church to be the church. If Christ is *not* present, a group of people may look like a church, sing like a church, preach like a church, even heal the sick like a church, but is not going to be a church. But if Christ is present among the people, you've got the church. As an ancient church father, Ignatius of Antioch, famously put it:

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where Christ is, there is the church.

And yet we are missing something profoundly important about the church if we talk only about the relation between Christ and the church. Equally important is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the church. There are two reasons for this. First, Jesus Christ is the *bearer* of the Spirit. All the Gospels are agreed on this: Jesus was the Christ because he was anointed by the Spirit; who Christ was and what Christ did were shaped by the Spirit who rested upon him and empowered him. Second, Jesus Christ is the *giver* of the Spirit. The ascended Christ sent the Spirit upon his disciples; the church was born out of the womb of the Spirit.

Here is how Luke the Evangelist describes the relation between the Spirit, Christ, and the church: The one whose baptism marked the start of his mission under the anointing of the Spirit¹ poured out on his disciples, after his resurrection and exaltation, the prophetic Spirit through whom all God's people would be gathered and empowered to proclaim God's reign in word and deed.² You can find a very similar description of the relation between Christ, Spirit, and the church in John's Gospel: The One upon whom the Spirit descended and remained,³ the One to whom the Spirit was given 'without measure',⁴ was the One who after his death, resurrection, and exaltation breathed the Spirit

upon the disciples as he sent them into the world.⁵ Clearly, Luke and John believed that the emergence of the church was bound up with Christ's sending of the Spirit, who anointed the disciples to continue the mission of Jesus.

These theological affirmations concerning the relations between Christ, the Spirit, and the church are well summarized by Raniero Cantalamessa's metaphorical claim that 'the last breath of Jesus [on the cross] is the first breath of the church'. Here, then, you have a definition of the church that is capable of providing impetus for new and fruitful developments: *the church is the continuation of Christ's anointing by the Spirit.*

One important consequence of this way of understanding the church is that the identity and the mission of the church became inextricably intertwined. The church's identity is its mission and church's mission is its identity; the church is what it does in the world and the church does in the world what it is. Put slightly differently: the identity of the church is the face of its mission turned inward; the mission of the church is the face of its identity turned outward.

Let us look first at Jesus' mission in the power of the Spirit and then turn our attention to the church's mission in that same power.

Jesus and the Spirit

Jesus, the Kingdom of God, and the People of God

This much seems quite clear in the

¹ Acts 10:38.

² Acts 2:33.

³ Jn. 1:32-33.

⁴ Jn. 3:34.

⁵ Jn. 20:19-23.

Gospels: Jesus did not come proclaiming the church; Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. Some scholars have therefore concluded that the emergence of the church had little to do with the mission of Jesus. The church is what came about after the proclamation of the kingdom had failed. Is the church therefore simply the result of the failure of a grander plan? Certainly not. Why did Jesus call the twelve apostles? Why not thirteen or eleven? The twelve symbolized the gathering of Israel's twelve tribes as the eschatological people of God. The people of God is inseparable from the kingdom of God. Why? The kingdom of God is coming and is the final presence of God with God's people.

I witnessed firsthand the integral connection between the kingdom and the church as I was growing up in communist Yugoslavia. I was the only professing Christian in a high school of 3000. Moreover, my father was the pastor of a small congregation of Pentecostals, a Protestant minority that did not have even the cultural legitimacy of the dominant Catholic and Orthodox churches. As I reflect back on those times, I realize that I learned two important lessons about the church even before I possessed the theological language to express them.

The first lesson: *no church without the kingdom of God*. The church is part of something greater than the church itself. When the windows facing toward the kingdom of God get closed, darkness descends upon the churches and the air becomes heavy. When the windows

facing toward the kingdom of God are opened, the life-giving breath and light of God give the churches fresh energy and hope.

Second lesson: *no kingdom of God without the church*. Just as the life of the churches depends on the kingdom of God, so the vitality of the hope for the kingdom of God depends on communities of faith. We come to recognize the fresh breath and light of God that renew the creation only because there are communities called churches—communities that keep alive and embody the memory of the crucified Messiah and hope for the Coming One. Without communities born of and sustained by the Spirit, hope for the kingdom of God would die out.

Jesus and Unconditional Grace

In the power of God's Spirit Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and gathered the people of God. But what was the content of his proclamation? Much can be said about this. Jesus offered divine forgiveness to sinners, fellowship to the outcast, care for the sick and downtrodden, and much more. Central to Jesus' mission was the making whole of bodies, persons, and relationships. But in what way did he go about doing this? Everything depends on how we answer this question.

Jesus' immediate predecessor, John the Baptist, was a preacher of judgement. In contrast, the most striking feature of Jesus' words and actions was unconditional grace. Jesus did not come with the axe of God's judgement, but with the open arms of divine embrace.

Two misunderstandings of uncon-

ditional grace must be cleared away before we can understand Jesus' mission.

The first misunderstanding: *unconditional grace is cheap grace*. It is most emphatically not. This can best be illustrated by attending to the nature of forgiveness. My former teacher and later colleague at Fuller Theological Seminary, Lewis Smedes, used to put it this way: to forgive is to blame. Just imagine hearing someone you have never met forgiving you for what you have never done. 'What do you mean, you forgive me?' you would respond. 'I have never seen you in my life! How could I have done you anything wrong?' Forgiveness does not ignore evil; it does not treat sin as if it were not there. Rather, forgiveness always includes naming the wrong that is being forgiven.

The second misunderstanding: *grace concerns only individuals*. As Jesus saw it, his proclamation and enactment of God's reign was the fulfilment of prophetic promises that God's Spirit-endowed servant would bring forth justice to the nations, preach good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, provide comfort for those who mourn, proclaim liberty to the captives, and announce the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus' mission was inescapably and deeply social, even political. And yet it was not political in the usual sense. Why not? Because at its centre lay neither naked power nor strict justice, but unconditional grace! Jesus was not an advocate of the ruling establishment enforcing stability through sub-

jugation. Neither was he a revolutionary prophet advocating victory through violence. Jesus' message and actions were profoundly incompatible with ruling and revolutionary programmes alike. That is why he had to take the path of suffering and death. Jesus Christ died because he proclaimed grace; and because he died, the church must proclaim God's unconditional grace.

The Church in the Power of the Spirit

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus announced the kingdom of God. In the power of the Spirit which the risen Christ poured upon his disciples, they continued his mission in the world. I want to highlight three crucial aspects of their mission and therefore of our mission: first, the rebirth of persons; second, the reconciliation of people; and third, the care of bodies. In all three, grace is central.

Rebirth of Persons

The church is called to proclaim that 'through the Holy Spirit' God seeks to pour 'his love' into the hearts of those who are 'weak', 'sinners', and 'enemies'.⁶ At the cross we see that the reach of God's love cannot be limited or confounded by ungodliness; as God lets the sun shine on good and evil alike, so God bestows grace on all. No deed is imaginable which could put a person outside the scope of God's love. Hence God's self-giving on the cross on behalf of all humanity. Now, like forgiveness, atonement presupposes blame. Far

⁶ Rom. 5:1-11.

from treating human sin as if it were not there, in atonement God names deception as deception, injustice as injustice, violence as violence. The good news is not that human sin does not matter, but that, the reality of the most heinous sin notwithstanding, God's arms are outstretched toward us to embrace us.

By naming sins in the context of God's unconditional grace, the Spirit of truth frees human beings from self-deception rooted in conscious or unconscious efforts at self-justification. Facing God on the cross with his arms outstretched toward us, we dare to look into the abyss of our own evil and recognize ourselves as who we are—'weak', 'sinners', 'enemies', the 'ungodly'. Freedom from self-deception comes, however, not simply because we know that we have been embraced, but also because of the certainty that the embrace of God will liberate us from the enslavement to evil that has so profoundly shaped us. 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'⁷ The grace that forgives is the grace that makes new.⁸

'New creation' is, of course, a future, an ultimate, an eschatological reality. This suggests that the good news of God's grace concerns not only our past and our present but also our future. Forgiven and transformed, we have been given 'a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the

dead',⁹ a hope 'that does not disappoint'.¹⁰

Summing up the three aspects of the proclamation about the rebirth of persons—forgiveness, transformation, hope—we can say that the church is called to proclaim the event of justification by grace through which God forgives, transforms, and promises to glorify sinful human beings, and thus take them up into God's own Trinitarian embrace.

Reconciliation of People

At the foundation of God's offer of grace, which remakes the sinner into a new creation, stands the cross of Christ as an act of God's self-giving. In baptism we are identified with the death of Christ and are raised as those who live 'by faith in the Son of God, who loved them and gave himself up for them'.¹¹ In the Lord's Supper, whose repeated celebration enacts what lies at the very heart of Christian life, we remember the One who gave his body 'for us'. We celebrate the Lord's Supper not only to reaffirm our communion with Christ but to be shaped in his image.¹² Since the very being of the church is grounded in God's self-giving, the life of the church must be modelled on God's self-giving.¹³ And since the mission of the church is nothing but the face of its identity turned toward the world, the church must engage in the ministry of reconciliation.

For the most part, the church has understood its ministry of reconcilia-

⁷ 2 Cor. 5:17.

⁸ Cf. Moltmann 1992, pp. 123 ff., 144 ff.

⁹ 1 Pet. 1:3.

¹⁰ Rom. 5:5.

¹¹ Gal. 2:20.

¹² 1 Cor. 11:24.

¹³ Cf. Johnson 1998.

tion to refer to the call for individuals to reconcile to God and their immediate neighbours. Reconciliation had a theological and personal meaning, but not a social meaning. On the other hand, for the larger world of social relations in recent decades, the twin categories of liberation and justice have come into special prominence. For many theological, socio-philosophical, and political reasons, I think that this is dangerously one-sided.

My unease with the liberationist perspective was born as I was trying to figure out what to do theologically with the war that was raging recently in my own country between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (and which continues today between Serbs and Albanians and Macedonians and Albanians). My original instinct, having been influenced early on by evangelical liberation theologians and later by my doctoral supervisor, Jürgen Moltmann, was to operate with the categories of liberation and oppression. Soon it became obvious that both Croats and Serbs—and later Muslims—perceived themselves as the oppressed who were engaged in the struggle for liberation! Moreover, if I tried to be somewhat objective, it seemed that all of them had at least internally plausible reasons for making that claim—namely that they were oppressed and engaged in the struggle for liberation. So, if I had offered them standard liberation theology, I would have provided only combat gear, and some new weapons to fight with. ‘Great,’ they would have said, Croats, Serbs, and Muslims alike,

‘God is on the side of the oppressed—our side.’ And so the war would have continued.

I needed a theological perspective that would recognize the depth of the evil that was being perpetrated. But it also had to offer the possibility of an end to the violence of mutual destruction and open the possibility of future reconciliation. Thus I concluded that any stress on liberation must be framed by the vision of reconciliation. Surely there are situations which cry for immediate liberation. Yet liberation can never be an end in itself, a goal independent of reconciliation. Liberation apart from reconciliation easily becomes destructive.

The church ought to pursue its social mission out of the heart of its own identity. We must retrieve and explicate the social meaning of the divine self-giving in order to reconcile sinful humanity. Though Paul describes the ministry of reconciliation as entreating people to ‘be reconciled to God’,¹⁴ that ministry for him has an inalienable social dimension because *reconciliation between human beings is intrinsic to their reconciliation with God*. At its centre, not only at its periphery, reconciliation has a horizontal dimension as well. It contains a turn away from enmity toward people, not just from enmity toward God, and it contains a movement toward the other who was the target of enmity. Hence the Pauline vision of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles, between men and women, between slaves and free.¹⁵ And

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 5:20.

¹⁵ Cf. Gal. 3:28.

hence the grand claim that ‘in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’.¹⁶ The ultimate goal not only for the church but also for the whole of reality is a vision of the reconciliation of all things in the embrace of the triune God.

Care of Bodies

As we have seen, central to Jesus’ mission in the power of the Spirit was the care of bodies. His programmatic sermon in Nazareth makes this plain: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’¹⁷ Attempts to spiritualize Jesus’ care for bodies abound. Consonant with his soteriology, Martin Luther, for example, consistently translated accounts of Christ’s healings of human bodies into reports on how Jesus liberates the conscience through forgiveness of sins. But this will clearly not do: Jesus forgave and he healed. The early church continued with the same kind of care for bodies: it healed the sick and it supported the poor so that ‘there was not a needy person among them’.¹⁸ The apostle Paul, too, did not only

proclaim reconciliation to God and between people, he also helped the poor¹⁹ and healed the sick.²⁰

Why the care of bodies? Most basically because the rebirth of persons who live in this material world, and who with this world make up the good creation of God, cannot be complete without the redemption of their bodies. The new birth of persons through the Spirit is the beginning—the ambiguous—of the rebirth of the whole cosmos.²¹ Similarly, the reconciliation of people who live embodied lives will be complete only when the reconciliation of all things takes place; there can be no eschatological bliss for God’s people without eschatological *shalom* for God’s world.

If the mission of the church includes care for bodies and requires us therefore to address larger social and ecological issues, where does the Spirit come in? Often the work of the Spirit has been limited to the church, to gathering people into communities, giving them gifts, uniting them, and inspiring them to proclaim the gospel, which aims in turn at further gathering. But is such a ‘centripetal’ understanding of the work of the Spirit adequate? Even more, are the implicit ecclesiological assumptions that inform it correct—namely, that the church is only a church when gathered, but not when ‘dispersed’, and that the work of the church is therefore primarily liturgical, and not

¹⁶ Col. 1:19-20.

¹⁷ Lk. 4:18-19.

¹⁸ Acts 4:34a.

¹⁹ 2 Cor. 8-9; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-4, Gal. 2:10.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 3:5.

²¹ Cf. Mt. 19:28; 2 Cor. 5:17.

‘secular’? Properly understood, the church is not a ‘gathering’ but a *community that gathers*, and the church’s work therefore is done both when the community is ‘gathered’ and when it is ‘dispersed’ in the world. Since to live as a Christian means to ‘walk in the Spirit’,²² *all* Christian work is done in the power of the Spirit of grace—whether it concerns the rebirth of persons, the reconciliation of people, or the care of bodies.

As the community of faith reaches into the world to touch all dimensions of its life, it will find that the Spirit of Christ at work in the community is the Spirit of life at work in the whole creation. Anointed by the Spirit, the church is sent to go where the Spirit is always already to be found preparing the way for the coming of the reign of God.

In place of a conclusion

Finally, I want to draw your attention to a wonderful image of the church that we encounter early in Christian history. The church, it is said, is like the moon. The moon has no light of its own. All the light by which it

makes our nights so beautiful is reflected light, light borrowed from the sun.

Most of my talk was dedicated to underscoring that the church is called to participate in Christ’s mission by announcing and practically demonstrating God’s coming in grace. The impression could emerge that the church is simply engaged in a mission of the same nature as Christ’s and guided with the same goal as his. Christ would then be simply the authoritative model for the church to imitate. But Christ is more than that, much more. The church is engaged in *Christ’s own* mission; indeed, it is Christ by the power of the Spirit who takes the church up in the service of his own mission. The church has no power of its own and no goals of its own. Like the moon, all the light that the church possesses is the light of Christ shining by the power of the Spirit. And of all the things that church may have—beautiful buildings, successful programmes, political power, or economic wealth—none of them ultimately matter and all may even be detrimental. The only thing that truly matters is that the Church be reflection of Christ’s own light in that it continues his mission anointed by the Spirit.

²² Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16 ff.

What Exactly is Meant by the ‘Uniqueness of Christ’? An Examination of the Phrase and Other Suggested Alternatives in the Context of Religious Pluralism: Part II

Bob Robinson

Keywords: Uniqueness, particularity, universality, distinctiveness, originality, absoluteness, exclusiveness,

3. Alternatives that emphasize discontinuity/particularity

Attention now turns to a cluster of words that emphasize the sheer *differentness* and *otherness* of Christ. Discontinuity draws attention to the unusual or extraordinary nature of the claims attached to him that derive from the particularities of salvation-history including the covenant with Israel and the reality and deci-

siveness of the incarnation. The not unreasonable confidence with which the viewpoint is held does not exempt its adherents from facing the consequences of the ‘scandal of particularity’, especially in a pluralist and postmodern world. The following are found among the possible alternatives to uniqueness; the list is not exhaustive.

(a) *Distinctiveness*

This term certainly suggests *difference* and any successful reinforcement of authentic difference is no small gain in circles that want to minimize what must be insisted on as the real and not imaginary divergences that exist between Christianity and other religions.

But the disadvantage of the term is that it need mean no more than what is indicated above as the first (and christologically the weakest) of the

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meanings of uniqueness: unique as particular and non-exclusive—but not significant. Samartha, for example, affirms the distinctiveness of Jesus—but only as one of many (and mutually enriching) 'different responses to the Mystery of God or Sat the Transcendent or Ultimate Reality'.⁵⁵ Hans Küng, in discussing 'The Challenge of the World Religions'⁵⁶ has a section entitled 'Not exclusiveness but uniqueness' in which he elaborates uniqueness in terms of distinctiveness.⁵⁷ And Moule, in his *The Origin of Christology*, in which he argues for an 'understanding of Jesus as more than individual, as transcendent and eternal and all comprehensive, which ... emerges in the New Testament',⁵⁸ also has a section entitled 'The Distinctiveness of Christ' in which he outlines the ways in which Jesus emerges as unprecedentedly distinctive in a number of ways.⁵⁹ Moule does, in fact, attach considerable significance to Christ⁶⁰ but this is not implied by the actual word 'distinctive'.

(b) Originality

The subtitle of Stephen Neill's discussion of the world religions entitled *Salvation Tomorrow* is noteworthy; he calls it *The Originality of Jesus Christ and the World's Religions*.⁶¹ He is not persuaded by the importance of supposed parallels to Christ. 'Jesus cannot be understood in any dimension other than his own. He has called into being a new world of reality, in which only those are at home who call him Lord.'⁶² Originality is one way of making this newness clear and, as with the description 'distinctive', there is certainly value in drawing attention to the differentness of the Christian message. Moreover, the notion of newness also possesses theological significance; it can be the sign of God's initiative pointing to the new creation in Christ. To question the originality may mean to diminish its significance.⁶³

However, it is also important to remember that Jesus did not fit the established categories of his day (or of the contemporary world for that matter); in other words, he is outside the categories of 'original' and 'non-original' and this fact greatly diminishes the usefulness of the notion of originality. And a further disadvantage of the term is that, as with the appeal to distinctiveness, it does not in itself sufficiently convey the significance of Christ.

⁵⁵ Stanley J. Samartha, 'The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), p. 114; the discussion of distinctiveness continues on to p. 117.

⁵⁶ A major section heading in Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, (ET: Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 119-74.

⁵⁷ The discussion is found in Küng, *On Being a Christian*, pp. 110-16.

⁵⁸ C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1977), p. 142.

⁵⁹ Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, pp. 146-55.

⁶⁰ Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, p. 158.

⁶¹ Stephen Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow: The Originality of Jesus Christ and the World's Religions* (London: Lutterworth, 1976).

⁶² Neill, *Salvation Tomorrow*, p. 148.

⁶³ Moule, *The Origin of Christology*, p. 9.

(c) *Particularity*

The notion of particularity can mean a number of things. It can simply be a means of making Harvey Cox's point that 'Jesus is in some ways, the most particularistic element of Christianity'.⁶⁴ Klaas Runia makes quite extensive use of the term in describing the Old Testament era of salvation-history with what he calls its ever-narrowing 'funnel' of particularism that eventually 'narrows to one human being: Jesus of Nazareth, who is called the Christ, the Messiah'.⁶⁵ Although Alister McGrath does not use the notion of particularity as a defining feature of the uniqueness of Christ, he does draw attention to the way in which Christian theology is 'concerned with the identity and significance of Jesus Christ, affirming and acknowledging the *particularity* of his cross and resurrection, and rejecting any temptation to lapse into generalities'.⁶⁶

Some forms of what is called 'inclusivism' (both Catholic and evangelical) also seem to merit the label offered by Gabriel Fackre: 'anonymous particularity'.⁶⁷ Fackre

also has a section that he calls 'revelatory particularity', presumably meaning a neo-orthodox position.⁶⁸ And, lest the notion of particularity not be understood, Torrance makes clear that he means 'the one unrepeatable particularity of [Christ's] incarnate reality'.⁶⁹ This notion of unrepeatability has significance in pluralistic religious contexts (including western New Age circles). As Brian Hebblethwaite observes about the incarnation, it cannot be thought of as a repeatable matter because if God is one, only one person can be God incarnate. It is true that a number of people could illustrate certain general truths about God's nature. However, as he also points out,

Jesus is *the* human face of God. The doctrine of the Incarnation is emptied of its point and value in referring to a real person-to-person encounter, if we suppose that a series of human beings from different times, places and cultures were all God incarnate. On such a view, God at once resumes the characteristics of vagueness and dread that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation teaches us to overcome.⁷⁰

The advantage of particularity is that it has few of the disadvantages of exclusivism; the disadvantage is that the term may not be substantial enough to carry what Christians have traditionally affirmed about Christ.

⁶⁴ Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1988), p. 6 (original emphasis).

⁶⁵ Klaas Runia, 'The Gospel and Religious Pluralism', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990), p. 368.

⁶⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p. 50 (original emphasis). It is clear to him that the New Testament 'affirms the particularity of the redemptive act of God in Jesus Christ' ('Jesus: the Only Way? Anglicanism and Religious Pluralism', in Donald Armstrong (ed.), *The Truth about Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 35 (original emphasis)).

⁶⁷ Gabriel Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism: the Current Debate', *Pro Ecclesia* 7 (1998), p. 392.

⁶⁸ Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism', p. 393.

⁶⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, 'The Atonement, The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order', in Nigel de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), p. 226.

⁷⁰ Brian Hebblethwaite, 'Jesus, God Incarnate', in his *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology* (Cambridge, CUP, 1987), p. 23.

(d) Absoluteness

In general terms the notion of absoluteness has come to mean 'unsurpassable' or 'having no restriction'. In recent theological discourse, the language of absoluteness is associated with the thought of Ernest Troeltsch from the beginning of the twentieth century (even though his own position was distinctly relativistic)⁷¹ and more recently with the writings of Carl Braaten. In the sense of 'unsurpassable' the term is certainly defensible in a christological context. Tom Torrance is another contemporary theologian given to using the language of absoluteness or, at least, to using the adjectival and adverbial forms. But in a paper replete with such usage, he also writes of the importance of taking an issue 'absolutely seriously'⁷²—which may simply mean 'very seriously' with no overtones of metaphysical certainty. (As Moran comments, 'There is nothing very absolute these days about "absolutely"'.⁷³)

But there are several substantial impediments to any appeal to the more traditional meaning of absoluteness. Firstly, there is its association with Hellenistic philosophical idealism in describing the unreachable and unknowable and this seems also to be true when 'absolute' is

used adjectivally. For this reason Moran considers that Christians may, in fact, be 'undermining rather than defending the gospel' by assigning an absolute uniqueness to it; this is because, as he puts it, 'a truly incomparable gospel would be an isolated gospel ... irrelevant to the ordinary concerns of ordinary people'.⁷⁴ What he means is that the criterion of *significance* (or what he calls increasing inclusiveness) is not met by the mere assertion of absoluteness.

The second problem with absolutist language about Christ is the pretentiousness of any claim framed in human language to have grasped the absolute. In other words, the term suggests what Miroslav Volf, in a paper on 'The Unique Christ in the Challenge of Modernity', calls 'modern epistemological absolutism'. In its place he prefers what he calls 'provisional certitude as an authentic Christian way'.⁷⁵ What is in question is not whether or not the eternal Logos and the risen Christ (like the majestic Triune God) possess qualities to be called 'absolute'. It is not so much the claim but what possession of the claim does to those sinners who claim it. If power corrupts then the claim to absolute and exclusive knowledge tends to a similar corruption, as Christian history shows. At issue is the point made by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Christ the Center*:

⁷¹ See Ernest Troeltsch, *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion* (Et: Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1971).

⁷² Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 236.

⁷³ Gabriel Moran, *Uniqueness: Problem or Paradox in Jewish and Christian Relations*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 133; he also comments that, 'People say absolutely when they simply but enthusiastically mean yes' (p. 133).

⁷⁴ Moran, *Uniqueness*, pp. 76f.

⁷⁵ Miroslav Volf, 'The Unique Christ in the Challenge of Modernity' in Bruce J. Nicholls (ed.), *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralist World* (Carlisle and Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster and Baker for WEF, 1995), pp. 101-04.

our human response to such disclosure ought to be that of silent adoration and the wise refusal to hint at any sense of having grasped the absolute except to bear witness to the way in which the absolute has grasped us.

(e) *Exclusiveness*

Given that the word is derived from the Latin, *excludere* 'to close out', meaning to shut out, to exclude, even to expel, the meaning of 'exclusive' is primarily negative. One dictionary definition of the word is 'not shared with others'; another is 'excluding some or most' as in 'an exclusive club' and, although the Christ-event has negative implications, it is surely unfortunate and unnecessary to describe the heart of the Good News in primarily negative and excluding categories. As a secondary description, spelling out some of the unavoidable implications of the gospel, it may well be helpful and even necessary to safeguard the fact that the gospel is not 'omni-compatible' and that its unrepeatability and finality cannot be compromised. This is the sense in which writers such as the Mennonite George Brunk (who is well aware of its limitations) use the term.⁷⁶

Not surprisingly, there are those who vigorously oppose the notion of exclusivism, but for particular (and even commendable) reasons. Hans Küng, for example, writes of

The arrogant domination of a religion

⁷⁶ See George Brunk, 'The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ,' in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Evans (eds.), *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994).

claiming an exclusive mission and despising freedom. ... We do not want a narrow-minded, conceited exclusive particularism which condemns the other religions in toto.⁷⁷

This does raise the question: would Küng be prepared to accept an exclusivism that did not display the pride and arrogance to which he objects? 'Restrictivism' (the restricting of salvation to those who make an explicit act of faith in Jesus Christ; or what Fackre calls 'imperial particularity'⁷⁸—a phrase perhaps borrowed from Mark Heim⁷⁹) is another consequence of a thoroughgoing exclusivism.

(f) *Christocentrism*

The great virtue of this term is that it does draw attention to the centrality of Christ and seemingly in a way that places it on the discontinuity side of the model. Perhaps because it is a neologism it is not widely used. Although it is not a term that he often uses, Alister McGrath does regard it as 'clear that evangelicalism is strongly Christocentric'.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, as with a number of other terms that assert discontinuity, a too strongly emphasized christocentrism can become an unbalanced christomonism. (Discussion below returns to this point.)

(g) *Singularity*

Tom Torrance repeatedly uses the

⁷⁷ Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p. 111 (original emphasis).

⁷⁸ Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism', p. 394.

⁷⁹ S. Mark Heim, *Is Christ the Only Way? Christian Faith in a Pluralistic World* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1985), pp. 125-27.

⁸⁰ McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, p. 50.

phrase 'the singularity of Christ' although he often qualifies it as 'absolute'⁸¹ or 'ineffable'.⁸² By 'singularity' he clearly means unique both as different and highly significant—and not that Christ is singular in the way that every religious teacher (or even every human being) might be called singular. However, the fact that Torrance so often needs to qualify the term shows the potential weakness of the word when used as a solitary descriptor of the Christ-event.

(h) *Decisiveness*

This is a term that has been overlooked somewhat in discussions of uniqueness and it seems that only one recent major work has employed it.⁸³ The notion of decisiveness points to an all-determining and conclusive event and has the kind of forcefulness that passages such as Acts chapter 2 and Romans chapter 3 seem to require. But the mention of the biblical passages brings out the weakness of the term: it requires a certain context of meaning to make clear why Christ is decisive. To declare that the Christ-event is decisive invites the questions *in what way?* And, *for whom?* But perhaps that kind of further explanation is needed for most of the terms so far considered.

⁸¹ Torrance, 'The Atonement'. pp. 228f, 231, 233.

⁸² Torrance, 'The Atonement'. p. 232.

⁸³ Origen Vasantha Jathanna, *The Decisiveness of the Christ-event and the Universality of Christianity in a World of Religious Plurality* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1981).

4. Deciding between the alternatives: a biblical-theological dynamic

In considering the advantages and disadvantages of the various terms it becomes clear that much depends on the methodology used. This study opts for a dynamic biblical-theological-contextual method and from it key themes or clusters of themes emerge as important and point to the conclusion that the terms 'unique' and 'uniqueness' are probably the best available, so long as they are defined and elaborated in a way that does not deny or distort other Christian starting points.

If theology is defined as the creative rethinking and retelling of the Christian story in new contexts (a process for which there are many New Testament precedents) then it could be argued that it should therefore include the following in order to bear the clearest possible witness to what God has done in Christ:

(a) *Anchoring Jesus in the uniqueness of Yahweh/Israel*

In his small but helpful volume, *Thinking Clearly About the Uniqueness of Christ*, Chris Wright splendidly establishes the link between the uniqueness of Yahweh and Israel, and the uniqueness of Jesus. He writes that

the Old Testament portrays God's saving intention and action in and through his people Israel as something unique. The Messiah, therefore as the one who embodied Israel, embodied also their uniqueness. ... In Jesus, then, the uniqueness of Israel and the uniqueness of Yahweh flow together for he embodied the one and he incarnated the other. So he shares and fulfils the identity and the

mission of both.⁸⁴

This is what anchors the particularity of Jesus in the eternal purposes of God. Maintaining the link between Jesus and God's covenant people is one means of preventing the concept of Christ's uniqueness from sliding off into christomonistic insularity.

(b) The Christian message as narrative

One reason for anchoring the particularity of Jesus in the uniqueness of Yahweh and Israel is that is what the biblical story tells us. The narrative dimension of the Christian message takes the themes of salvation-history and election (balancing Genesis 12 with Deuteronomy 4) to elaborate the universal purpose of Yahweh that leads to the coming of the promised Messiah. The genre of narrative enables the elements of continuity and discontinuity to receive appropriate emphasis and it extends the story into the eschaton as well. As Fackre puts it when calling this perspective that of 'narrative particularity', 'an eschatological universality joins a christological particularity and a Noachic commonality',⁸⁵ making clear that the eschatological dimension of the narrative also helps enhance the dimensions of uniqueness and universality.

Moreover, the narrative, both explicitly and implicitly, invites its

hearers to assess and even to join the story. The narrative genre (as opposed to all abstract accounts of the Christian message) has some distinct strategic advantages in speaking of uniqueness in a postmodern, pluralist and nonfoundationalist age, advantages over what might be called merely propositional evangelism.

(c) Respecting the tension between continuity and discontinuity

The notions of continuity and discontinuity are still useful in pointing to a key tension that must be maintained in order to be faithful to the biblical revelation and honest to the experiential encounter with the religions. As Fackre puts it, 'the creation—fall—covenant-with-Noah drama opens the horizon' to the elements of continuity and 'the chapters on the covenant with Israel ... and the decisive Word enfleshed in Jesus Christ supports the affirmation of the particularist views.'⁸⁶

In other words, the elements of discontinuity point to those elements that can and should be elaborated in terms of uniqueness understood as fullness and finality. But that is not the whole picture. Jesus and Paul both assumed that their audiences could and would grasp what they were told, else why bother to preach and teach? Jesus acted as teacher, rabbi, parable teller, healer and exorcist, miracle worker, prophet, priest, king; all of which assumes a continu-

⁸⁴ Chris Wright, *Thinking Clearly about the Uniqueness of Christ* (Crowborough: Monarch, 1997), pp. 104f; see also pp. 95-98.

⁸⁵ Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism', pp. 394f; this 'narrative particularity' seems to be Fackre's own position among the many he outlines; see his conclusion (p. 395).

⁸⁶ Fackre, 'Christ and Religious Pluralism', p. 395.

ity of both function and intelligibility with the world of inherited Judaism. To be sure, he was these things *par excellence*; but he was not these things *sui generis*, and that's the point. In an anxiety to defend what must rightly be called the uniqueness of Christ, the whole story is not told if elements of continuity are omitted. So, in order to be faithful to the whole of the biblical witness, evangelicals will also give appropriate weight to the elements of continuity. Even as Jesus and Paul often began with these elements of continuity in their public discourses, so might followers today. This has implications for how Christians witness in a pluralist world.

(d) *The trinitarian dimensions of Christology*

The principal reason for declaring christomonism to be less than faithful to the fullness of revelation orthodox is that the Christian understanding of God is ultimately trinitarian and christology must be in harmony with this understanding of God. A christological absolutism might more easily enable some versions of uniqueness and exclusivism to be defended but Christians cannot remain christomonists. Moreover, a trinitarian perspective has some perhaps unexpected consequences for those who see uniqueness only or predominantly in terms of exclusivist and christomonistic categories. There is not space to elaborate further except to note the writings of Amos Yong⁸⁷ and

Gavin D'Costa⁸⁸, both of whom have been working on the implications of pneumatology and trinitarianism for an enhanced theological understanding of the religions.

5. Unique as universal-final-normative

In the light of its disputed meaning, is the notion of uniqueness redeemable? Jathanna believes 'the term is laden with such ambiguity that its communicability is greatly hampered.'⁸⁹ That may be true, but there is value in trying to clarify the semantic range of the term.

(a) *Clarifying the semantic range of uniqueness: (A1) singular and nonexclusive; (A2) singular and absolute; (B) universal and inclusive*

Some writers simply retain the notion of uniqueness but in a qualified form that avoids the charge of 'mere particularity'. Ramachandra simply writes of 'the *unique nature of the uniqueness* that is claimed by Jesus.'⁹⁰ This wording at least implies that there is something unusual or significant in the *kind* of uniqueness that Christians claim for Christ.

At this point it is helpful to return

the Wind Blows...": On Envisioning a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions', *Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 14 (1999), pp. 81-112.

⁸⁸ See, for example, chapter 4 of Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

⁸⁹ Jathanna, *The Decisiveness of the Christ-event*, p. 29.

⁹⁰ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Faiths in Conflict? Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), p. 115 (original emphasis).

⁸⁷ See, for example, Amos Yong, 'The Turn to Pneumatology in Christian Theology of Religions: Conduit or Detour?' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35 (1998), pp. 437-454; "'Not Knowing Where

to the analysis of Gabriel Moran. Within his meaning A (unique as singular), identity is derived from an ever greater exclusion of others; there is differentiation, a tendency towards exclusiveness. But within Moran's meaning A, further differentiation seems possible. The singularity that is at the heart of this meaning of uniqueness can be of two sorts. Meaning A1 could be assigned to a thing that differs in only *some* ways from every other *similar* thing. This is the sense in which snowflakes or fingerprints or DNA profiles differ from other snowflakes or fingerprints or DNA profiles even though one individual snowflake has far more in common with other snowflakes than with any one fingerprint. In this sense *nothing is more common than uniqueness*. The key to this 'ordinary' uniqueness is contingency because it is always logically possible for there to be a snowflake or fingerprint or DNA profile just like another.

Meaning A2, however, could be given to an event that is also singular but absolutely *different* in every possible respect: that constant called the speed of light or the number seven for example. The speed of light and the number seven are constants that cannot be cloned. When applied to the notion of uniqueness we could then call meaning A1 'singular uniqueness' and we could call meaning A2 'absolute uniqueness'. This brings meaning A2 close to meaning B (unique as significant) but in meaning B identity relates not to singularity but to the opposite: universality, relationship, and ever greater inclu-

sion and complexity.

So, the meaning or meanings of uniqueness seem to stretch over the following semantic range:

- Meaning A1: unique as singular and non-exclusive—and not significant.
- Meaning A2: unique as singular and absolute—and significant.
- Meaning B: unique as universal and inclusive—and significant.

Clearly when applied to Christ, Christians—or at least conservative Christians—assert his uniqueness in all three meanings (A1, A2 and B) though with quite different qualities in mind in each case.

Meaning A1: unique as singular and non-exclusive—and not significant.

Here Jesus is a solitary individual with a singular human identity that shares the human commonalities of Jewishness, maleness, discrete DNA. He is the son of a human mother; he is a carpenter cum teacher; he possesses all those human faculties and emotions that the ancient Creeds insisted on in calling Jesus fully human (and of which we need constant reminders, given the ever-present evangelical tendencies to docetism). This implies some form of *continuity* with all who are human.

Some, who clearly do not give the word uniqueness the range of meanings that evangelicals do, nonetheless do use it in the sense of meaning A1: unique as singular and non-exclusive. Back in 1932, Hocking's *Rethinking Missions* (which threatened to—and perhaps did—undercut cross-cultural mission in a number of 'mainstream' denominations)

could nonetheless state that 'The uniqueness of Christianity is in no way compromised' by the placing of the other world religions more or less on a level with the Christian message.⁹¹ It is ironic (or simply a case of poor editing and publishing practice) that most if not all of the contributors to the symposium *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* do, despite the title of the collection, seem to affirm at least this one meaning of Christian uniqueness. Their concern is simply to 'interpret it [the received notion of uniqueness] anew';⁹² one of them even comments that, in a Sri Lankan context, 'that Jesus is unique is obvious even to Buddhists, just as Christians would hardly question the uniqueness of Gautama. Is not each of us unique?'⁹³ In other words, what is at stake is not the unique historical singularity of figures such as Jesus (or Gautama) but the claim that Christ is uniquely privileged in providing access to the fullness of revelation or salvation. The claim of the 'myth-makers' is that Jesus is unique *for Christians*, but not necessarily significant for anyone else beyond the Christian community. Ariarajah writes that: 'we do not mean that we should give up the centrality of Christ *for the Christian faith*, in both its

historical and transcendent dimensions'.⁹⁴ The definition of meaning A1 could well be extended to read: 'unique as singular and non-exclusive—and not significant *for those without existing commonality*'.

Meaning A2: unique as singular and absolute—and significant.

Here attention is drawn to those characteristics our discussion has described as 'absolutely different in every possible respect'. In an interesting introduction to his discussion of the singularity of Christ, Tom Torrance points out that the advent of relativity and quantum theory have meant that the concept of singularity or uniqueness, once so offensive to the Enlightenment rationalism that equated the scientific with the universal, is now more acceptable, with nature itself providing examples of what he calls the stubbornly unique and absolutely singular. The classical scientific mind regarded any individual event as what he calls 'a transient particular manifestation of what is universally, timelessly and necessarily true'.⁹⁵ (Which is why, from the Enlightenment period onwards, Christianity was seen simply as one religion in a universal class of religions and why claims to incarnation or miracle were seen as violations of 'universal natural law'.)

Torrance goes on to give as examples not only what he calls 'the absolute singularity of the ... incred-

⁹¹ William E. Hocking (ed.), *Re-thinking Missions, a Layman's Enquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), p. 49.

⁹² See Paul Knitter, 'Preface', in John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/London: SCM, 1987), p. vii.

⁹³ Aloysius Pieris, 'The Buddha and the Christ', in Hick and Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, p. 171.

⁹⁴ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Hindus and Christians. A Century of Ecumenical Thought* (Amsterdam and Grand Rapids, MI: Rodopi and Eerdmans, 1991), p. 211 (emphasis added).

⁹⁵ Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 227.

ibly dense state from which ... the universe ... expanded, but the absolute specificity of the speed of light'. The space-time continuum is defined by reference to the absolute status of the movement of light

while light itself is not defined by reference to anything else within the universe. Thus ... the *concept of singularity* has become inalienably lodged in the foundation and rational structure of scientific knowledge.⁹⁶

This shift in understanding of the intelligible nature of the created universe enables a greater freedom in speaking about the uniqueness of the Christ-event in the contemporary world. As Torrance puts it:

The singular or the unique cannot be expressed in the language of abstraction for abstract generalisation abrogates both the concretely real and the temporally real, which are properly to be understood only out of themselves.⁹⁷

And this is true for the singularity of Christ; even as light itself is not defined by reference to anything else within the universe, so Christ—at least in these aspects of his person and saving death—is not defined by anything else. This is *discontinuity* with the human species and with other religious leaders; this is Christ in his divinity, Christ as eternal Logos, Christ in the unrepeatability of his reconciling death.

Meaning B: unique as universal and inclusive—and significant.

This is what Gabriel Moran calls 'increasing inclusiveness'⁹⁸ or what we have simply called significance; when applied to Christ it is his uni-

versality. In the biblical perspective the particularity of God's gracious action has a purpose—a universal purpose; salvation is *particular*, but it leads to a *universal* mission. To use Runia's language, the Spirit ensures that the perspective no longer remains narrow:

the most extreme particularism issues in the widest possible universalism! ... [T]his unique Christ is also the universal Redeemer. His coming is not only a moment of history, but it is the very *centre* of history.⁹⁹

As a papal encyclical puts it: It is the 'uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance'.¹⁰⁰ Even Hans Küng, despite his scathing attack on exclusivism, is happy to defend uniqueness or, more precisely, 'an inclusive Christian universalism, claiming for Christianity *not exclusiveness, but certainly uniqueness*'.¹⁰¹

To summarise: the concept of uniqueness is worth defending and using—provided its semantic range is carefully defined and respected. Moran catches some of this when he writes that 'Jesus is unique and Christ is unique, but they are unique in almost opposite ways'.¹⁰² Lipner can also write that "uniqueness" in a theological sense is not a monolithic

⁹⁹ Runia, 'The Gospel and Religious Pluralism', pp. 369f.

¹⁰⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter of 1990, *Redemptoris Missio*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p. 112 (original emphasis). He writes later of 'the simple and unique grandeur' of the message of Christianity (p. 115).

¹⁰² Moran, *Uniqueness*, p. 77. His meaning is that, as he later puts it, 'Jesus is the man's name; Christ is a title, attached to which is a set of ideas' (p. 78).

⁹⁶ Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 228.

⁹⁷ Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 229.

⁹⁸ See Moran, *Uniqueness*, p. 20-23.

concept but embraces two complementary ideas which although linked are clearly distinguishable'—and these are the notions of pre-eminence (meaning that there is no theological equivalent for Christ) and of finality (the assertion that there is no theological substitute for him).¹⁰³ Given the semantic range of uniqueness it may even be possible to qualify some meanings of the term. In other words, the grammarians' rule of not qualifying uniqueness cannot be maintained of meaning A1 but it does apply to the essential singularity of meanings A2 and B.

(b) *Further refinement?*

Some recent writing by Knitter suggests a further extension of the semantic range of uniqueness when used of Christ. One of the most recent restatements of Knitter's pluralist christology is to be found in the opening pages of the symposium *The Uniqueness of Jesus*¹⁰⁴ in which he offers 'Five theses on the uniqueness of Jesus'. He insists that he 'and most other so-called pluralist theologians' are 'not questioning *whether* Jesus is unique but only *how*' (5). He believes 'it is not necessary to insist that Jesus is the *only* mediator of God's saving grace in history. More precisely, it is not necessary to proclaim God's revelation

in Jesus as *full, definitive, or unsurpassable*' (7). The universal dimension of the uniqueness of Jesus 'can be found in his insistence that salvation or the Reign of God must be realized *in this world* through *human actions* of love and justice' (11).¹⁰⁵ In other words, he defends the use of the term uniqueness in the sense of A1 (singular and nonexclusive) but he wants to draw attention to the way in which Christ does continue to have universal significance. The Christ symbol has this significance because of the way in which it points to some universal ideal of love and justice that can inspire all people. In other words, further semantic differentiation within meaning A is possible: unique as singular and nonexclusive—and significant because it points to a supposedly universal ideal of love and justice.

(c) *Adding qualifiers such as 'final' and/or 'universal'*

One means of respecting the wide semantic range of 'uniqueness' is simply to attach one or more qualifiers. So, James Smart asserts that in the Bible there is to be found 'the *absolutely unique* once-and-for-all witness' to divine action'.¹⁰⁵ DiNoia writes of 'particularistic universality'¹⁰⁶, and 'nonexclusive particulari-

¹⁰³ Julius Lipner, 'Christians and the Uniqueness of Christ', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), p. 364.

¹⁰⁴ Paul Knitter, 'Five Theses on the Uniqueness of Jesus', in Leonard Swidler and Paul Mojzes (eds.), *The Uniqueness of Jesus: a Dialogue with Paul F. Knitter*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997). Further references in the paragraph are to 'Five Theses' (original emphasis).

¹⁰⁵ James Smart, *The Cultural Subversion of the Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), p. 53 (emphasis added).

¹⁰⁶ Section heading in J. A. DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions. A Christian Perspective* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), pp. 75-82.

ty'¹⁰⁷ and Christ as 'unique and unsurpassable'.¹⁰⁸ But to follow the implications of our multidimensional definition of uniqueness leads to a definition in terms not only of singularity but also of universality, finality, and inclusiveness as well.

In order to respect the different nuances between what is claimed for revelation and salvation, it seems best to employ the notions of fullness and finality and so to define the uniqueness of Christ in terms of the fullness of revelation and the finality of salvation to be found in him.

(d) *Balancing uniqueness and universality*

Is Christ unique because universal? Or universal because unique? The biblical keys to answering the questions might include the following passages: Philippians 2:5-11 and Isaiah 45:21-23 (noting that both passages come from a pluralistic context, but the essential particularities of their assertions remain intact); Matthew 28:18-20. The answer to the question seems more to be that we assert Christ's universality because of his uniqueness than the other way around.¹⁰⁹ But it is also true that, for whatever specific reasons, all religions and ideologies claim universality. In Newbigin's words:

No faith can command ... final and absolute allegiance ... if ... it is only true for certain places and certain people. In a world which knows that there is only one physics and one mathematics, religion cannot do less than claim for its affirmations a like universal validity.¹¹⁰

And as the Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II in 1999, *Ecclesia in Asia*, puts it:

As the definitive manifestation of the mystery of the Father's love for all, Jesus is indeed unique, and 'it is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance, whereby, while belonging to history, he remains history's centre and goal'.¹¹¹

The achievement of this balance between uniqueness and universality is not an easy task but it is important to achieve a balance; as George Brunk points out:

Taken alone, the particularistic stream ... becomes sectarian and exclusivistic, unable to see truth and good elsewhere and uninterested in the sharing of its truth, to say nothing of learning from others. On the other side, the universalistic stream ... alone tends towards syncretism, bland inclusivism, and indifferent tolerance, unable to accept a view of God who allows truth to be conditioned by the historical process.¹¹²

It is, of course, by means of the Holy Spirit that the particularity of Christ is made universally available—or, to make a rather different point, is related to the universal acting of God in human history.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ See the title of J. A. DiNoia 'Christian Universalism: The Nonexclusive Particularity of Salvation in Christ', in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (eds.), *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 37-48.

¹⁰⁸ DiNoia, *The Diversity of Religions*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁹ See further: Gavin D'Costa, 'Toward a Trinitarian Theology of Religions,' in Cornille and Neckebrouck (eds.) *A Universal Faith?* (Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 150-53.

¹¹⁰ J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, *A Faith for This One World?* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 30-41.

¹¹¹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 14 1999 (quoted from his Encyclical Letter of 1990, *Redemptoris Missio*, 6).

¹¹² Brunk, 'The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ', pp. 49f.

¹¹³ See Yong, 'The Turn to Pneumatology'.

(e) Some conclusions—and the challenge of discipleship

This article has argued for what Edmund Soper once called 'uniqueness together with continuity'¹¹⁴ and Soper is still worth quoting:

[T]he uniqueness of Christianity is to be found in Jesus Christ, who revealed a God quite different from any other divine being. He is the God of holy or righteous love, made known in his innermost nature by his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This does not imply that God has not made himself known in other ways and in other religions.¹¹⁵

The challenge is to hold together uniqueness and universality, particularity and continuity. Jesus is the particular light, that 'true light' that was coming into the world; yet he is also that universal light 'which enlightens/shines on everyone' (John 1:9) in some way.

These are not matters that will be settled by the mere writing and reading of academic papers no matter how persuasive they might be; the challenges of discipleship and humility remain decisive. As Lesslie Newbigin once pointed out: 'To claim finality for Jesus Christ ... is to claim that commitment to him is the way in which [people] can become truly aligned to the ultimate end for which all things were made.' This is why the church confidently repeats his call, 'Follow me.'¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Edmund Davison Soper, *The Philosophy of the Christian World Mission* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), p. 225.

¹¹⁵ Soper, *The Philosophy of the Christian World Mission*, p. 227. He goes on to discuss the problems of positions that assert uniqueness without continuity, and continuity without uniqueness (see p. 229).

¹¹⁶ J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 115.

Commitment and humility are prerequisites for grasping—or being grasped by—this unique Christ. In a forceful discussion, Alister McGrath draws attention to the authority of Christ as a challenge to one of the leading features of contemporary worldviews: the supposed narcissistic right to human mastery and autonomous self-definition.¹¹⁷

Moreover, it is these qualities of discipleship and humility that will help us to cope with what in a post-modern setting is not so much the *claim* of the uniqueness of Christ but the offence of the *kind of people* making the claim. As a Mennonite commentator observes,

Practically speaking, the deepest scandal in our commitment to exclusiveness is not the claim of the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ but the burden for the followers of Christ to represent his exclusiveness through the actions and structures of finite history and imperfect humanity. ... The irony of a finite people bearing a final message must not be forgotten or dissolved away by absolutizing the church or relativizing the claim [that Christ is unique].¹¹⁸

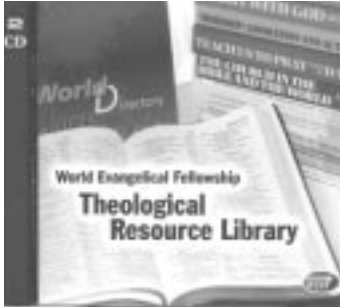
Are the traditional claims for the uniqueness of Christ sustainable? Yes—provided attention is given to the qualifying features noted above, and provided the substantial semantic range of the notion of uniqueness is respected. This range is very wide and, as we have seen, embraces four quite distinct meanings: first, unique as singular, nonexclusive and not significant; second, unique as significant but in the three different senses of singular and nonexclusive; next,

¹¹⁷ McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, pp. 30-35.

¹¹⁸ Brunk, 'The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ', pp. 50, 52.

singular and absolute; and finally, universal and inclusive. All four meanings can, with explanation, appropriately be applied to Christ—but with a wide range of implications. Considerable care, then,

should be exercised in calling Christ unique given that the four different usages of the term unique in contemporary theological discussion imply quite different things about him.



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After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity

by Miroslav Volf

(Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology
for a Postmodern Age, series editor,
Alan G. Padgett)

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
Publishing Company, 1998

ISBN 0-8028-4440-5

Pb. 314 pages.

*Reviewed by Brad Green, Union
University, Jackson, Tennessee*

Miroslav already has several scholarly publications to his credit, so it may come as some surprise to learn that *After Our Likeness*, the first volume in Eerdmans' 'Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age' series, is actually a revision of a dissertation under Jürgen

Moltmann at University of Tübingen. Volf's monograph can be divided into two main parts. Part I offers an exposition of the trinitarian and ecclesial theology of two key contemporary theologians: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, representing Roman Catholicism, and John D. Zizioulas representing Eastern Orthodoxy. After roughly one hundred pages of exposition, Volf spends the last 155 pages offering his own understanding of the church, which he roots in a certain construal of the Trinity.

Volf's topic is 'the relation between persons and community in Christian theology' (p. 1). The 'focus' of the book is 'the community of grace, the Christian church' (pp. 1-2). The 'point of departure' for the author 'is the thought of the first Baptist, John Smyth, and the notion of the church as "gathered community" that he shared with the Radical Reformers'

(p. 2). Volf's purpose in this volume is 'to counter the tendencies toward individualism in Protestant ecclesiology and to suggest a viable understanding of the church in which both person and community are given their proper due' (p. 2). Indeed, Volf's 'ultimate goal is to spell out a vision of the church as an image of the triune God' (p. 2). This is accomplished by means of a dialogue with Ratzinger and Zizioulas. Volf is sympathetic with both feminist and believers' church theology, but posits that neither tradition adequately roots the reality of the church in the Trinity. Volf is sympathetic to the voluntarism and egalitarianism he sees in the believers' church tradition, but seeks to avoid the potential tendency towards personal autonomy. Central to Volf's argument is the dual emphasis upon person and community. That is, a person is not an individual who then 'decides' to relate to others. Rather, we are 'communal beings from the outset.' One might say that relationships *constitute* what it means to be a person in the first place.

Volf's basic thesis regarding the preferability of the Free Church model is as follows: 'a Free Church ecclesiology can be dogmatically legitimate, can be commensurate with contemporary societies, and, for that reason and under certain conditions, can prove to be superior to other ecclesiologies' (p. 22). Through dialogue with Ratzinger and Zizioulas, Volf seeks to enrich the Free Church tradition (p. 24). Volf summarizes his schema as follows: 'although traditional Free Church ecclesiology is individualistic, in reality the commu-

nity plays an important role in the ecclesial life of the Free Church; in dialogue with other ecclesial models, I try theoretically to retrieve ecclesial life' (p. 24). Ultimately, as the title suggests, this ecclesial life is to be modelled after the loving and intimate relations of the three persons of the Trinity. Throughout the volume Volf uses the Baptist John Smyth as his sparring partner. Volf is generally working from within the baptistic model in his dialogue with Ratzinger and Zizioulas, but he also wishes to expand and criticize the baptistic tradition at the same time. (cf. pp. 172ff. on 'The Ecclesial Character of Salvation').

While there is much in Volf's interaction with Ratzinger and Zizioulas that is helpful and insightful, it is necessary to suggest a few negative criticisms. First, given that this volume appears in the 'Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age' series, it is fair to question the volume's commitment to egalitarianism (particularly of the modern sort). If we are to model our relationships after the Trinity, can we really find a thoroughgoing egalitarianism in the Godhead? Second, given the contemporary interest in 'modelling' ecclesial and human relations after the Trinity, it is worth asking if such a move is really desirable after all. Does Scripture speak about us modelling our personal or ecclesial life after the Trinity? Perhaps, but it does not seem to be particularly explicit in Scripture. The idea of modelling the church after the Trinity appears fraught with difficulties. Volf avoids some of these by speaking of the

church as the 'image' of the Trinity, but the move from trinitarian relationships to human relationships is, in the end, a difficult one to make.

Whether Volf's baptistic and egalitarian view of the church is superior to the positions of Ratzinger and Zizioulas is difficult to discern. Baptistic readers, whether they are egalitarians in the way that Volf is or not, will benefit from Volf's 'defense' of a baptistic understanding of the church. Other evangelicals, whether Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Episcopalian, might be challenged by Volf's vigorous free church and baptistic vision, for in the end, his emphasis on the local church is quite compelling. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox readers might not immediately run to the local Baptist church, but they will surely benefit from this theologically rigorous and at times inspiring articulation of the free church tradition.

Christian theology at the University of Nottingham, has written a prodigious commentary on *First Corinthians* which will be welcomed by students, scholars, and pastors alike. Although the commentary series (NIGTC) is intended for 'students who want something less technical than a full-scale critical commentary' (xv), this volume of 1353 pages can certainly be classified as a 'full-scale critical commentary'. The commentary contains six new features: 1) a new translation; 2) sectional introductions; 3) extended notes on the theological issues of special concern today; 4) attention to socio-historical backgrounds; 5) histories of interpretation; and 6) the impact of culture on the Corinthian Christians. These six features make the volume a comprehensive, up-to-date, and valuable addition to the literature on *First Corinthians*.

The 52 page Introduction deals with complex background issues. Thiselton argues on the basis of archaeological and historical evidence that Corinth was a Roman rather than a Greek city. This claim has important implications for understanding the nature of several issues addressed within the epistle, particularly for the issue of head coverings for women (1 Cor. 11:2-16). Thiselton also emphasises the pluralistic atmosphere of the city and its obsession with peer-group prestige at the expense of traditional values. Consequently, Thiselton sees close parallels between Corinth's socio-economic culture and postmodernism. He writes, 'All this provides an embarrassingly close model of a

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**The First Epistle to the
Corinthians: A Commentary on
the Greek Text (The New
International Greek Testament
Commentary)**

by Anthony C. Thiselton

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College of Queensland, Brisbane,
Australia*

Anthony C. Thiselton, professor of

postmodern context for the gospel in our times, even given the huge historical distance and distances in so many other respects' (17). Again, later in the commentary Thiselton writes, 'The more closely writers examine Graeco-Roman society and the pluralism of its ethical traditions, the more the Corinthian situation appears to resonate with our own' (452). As such pastors will find Thiselton's theological comments on the text invaluable for preaching the gospel in the current postmodern climate.

With most commentators Thiselton perceives the underlying problem of the Corinthian church to be that of an 'overrealized eschatology' (40). This theological fallacy, which goes against the very core of Christian self-understanding in terms of the cross, was aggravated by the competitive pragmatism of the city culture. Employing insights from rhetorical criticism Thiselton argues for the integrity of the epistle as a whole and stresses the priority of its theological intention (following leads from Pogoloff that content has precedence over form). Paul was preeminently a theologian (50). The Corinthian misunderstandings of the gospel, which led to unchristian conduct, are redressed by Paul through a theological presentation of 'the nature of the gospel as centered in the cross of Christ' (107).

Thiselton's consistent focus on the centrality of the cross is the thread that binds the commentary together and demonstrates his thorough understanding of the *crux interpretum* of Paul's theology and practice.

The cross defines Christian mind-set, theology, and practice. 'In Paul's theology the cross is more than (but not less than) a remedy and atonement for past sins. It provides the basis for Christian identity and his [sic] transformative power to reshape Christian existence in the present and the future' (147). This insistence on the centrality of the cross has wide ranging practical implications for Christian living. 'The temptation to assume that Christians have already "arrived" nourishes a mood of self-congratulation which is entirely at odds with the proclamation of the cross: a Christ wounded, humiliated, and done-to-death' (156). Thiselton is always quick to glimpse the practical significance of Paul's theology for today.

The many ethical issues raised by the Corinthian church demonstrate the inseparability of Christian identity and Christian lifestyle. Although in some instances Paul constructs a situational ethic, certain moral principles, rooted in the Old Testament, stand above and beyond situational variables. Therefore, Thiselton's understanding of Pauline ethics is in the main conservative.

Thiselton agrees with Barth on the importance of chapter 15 for understanding the epistle as a whole. The resurrection is understood as *the* divine act according to promise and took place within the public domain. Since believers are represented by Jesus, the resurrection is the foundation of the present life and future hope. Thiselton rejects the ideas that the resurrection body is a transcendent physical essence or a nonphys-

ical body and argues for the definition of Barrett that the resurrection body is a new body animated by the Spirit. 'Body, therefore, affirms the biblical tradition of a positive attitude toward physicality as a condition for experiencing life in its fullness, but also *assimilates, subsumes, and transcends the role of the physical in the public domain of earthly life*' (1279).

Thiselton has provided a persuasive interpretation of *First Corinthians*. However, it is perhaps inevitable that such a massive undertaking on a lengthy and complicated text contains some gaps. Even though Thiselton is very much aware of the 'disappointment so often experienced when readers take up a substantial, scholarly commentary only to find that in the end it has failed to address precisely the questions to which they were seeking some kind of answer' (xvi), significant grammatical and theological issues are sometimes still omitted from comment. I will restrict my remarks here only to chapter 15. Thiselton correctly asserts that chapter 15 serves as the climax of *First Corinthians*, but he does not show how the chapter is related to the diverse issues raised in the epistle. The issue of universalism suggested at verse 22 and the different eschatological interpretations generated by verses 23 and 24 are not discussed. Much more needs to be said about Jewish and Gnostic views of the resurrection in order to understand the nature of the Corinthian problem. And there are no comments, for example, on the expres-

sions σωζεοθε ('you are being saved') in verse 2 and on τὸ ἔργον τοῦ κυρίου ('the work of the Lord') in verse 58. In this connection, the commentaries of Fee and Barrett will still remain the first port of call for students of the Greek text.

Nevertheless, apart from these omissions, the commentary presents a fine scholarly achievement. The substantial bibliographies, the excursions incorporating ancient as well as the most recent scholarly discussion, and the comprehensive indices at the end make the volume not only a welcome addition to the literature on *First Corinthians*, but also a useful resource for the study of Pauline theology. Thiselton's interpretation of *First Corinthians* will well confront postmodern tendencies in the church today.

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God Moves in a Mysterious Way: The Hungarian Protestant Foreign Mission Movement (1756-1951)

Missiological Research in the Netherlands Series, No. 4

By Dr A. M. Kool

Zoetermeer, Netherlands: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V., 1993, ISBN 90-239-0796-5 Pb 1023pp

Reviewed by John Roxborough, School of Ministry, Knox College, Dunedin, New Zealand.

This substantial doctoral thesis for the University of Utrecht written in English by the Dutch missiologist, Anne-Marie Kool reflects her com-

mitment to providing information about the 'Second World' in its Protestant and missionary dimensions. As such it is a detailed labour of love, and a massive contribution to awareness of another dimension of the global story of mission. Dr Kool is currently Director of the Protestant Institute for Mission Studies in Budapest, and the book is now also available in Hungarian.

Dr Kool re-evaluates Hungarian Protestant missions from their beginnings through to the Communist clamp-down in 1951 and beyond against the Marxist official view that they were imperialist or irrelevant. She examines the roots of Protestantism in Hungary, and of Protestant foreign mission agencies in the 19th and 20th century. All agencies and influences are treated seriously, but she makes a special comparison of the Hungarian Evangelical Christian Missionary Society (MEKMSz) and the Hungarian Lutheran Mission Association (MAHEN), and the post-World War II Hungarian Reformed Foreign Mission Society.

In her conclusions Dr Kool notes that Hungarian Protestants saw their geographical mission located among Muslims in Bosnia and peoples in central Russia. World War I saw Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia who retained the vision, and their return revived interest in Russia until the Communist takeover there made it impossible. Attempts in the Balkans, Bulgaria and Albania were again frustrated by personal factors, political realities, and by theological and political shifts within Hungary. They can never have been very promising

prospects. Frustration with traditional fields led some to work with other missions in China and Indonesia. The mission agencies had difficulty getting church support for their vision, but revival stirred interest and links with Finland and Holland were hopeful until again political developments overrode missionary intention.

After 1951, despite Communism, news of mission elsewhere began to be circulated privately, and the Lutheran Church was able to revive interest in 1957. Some individuals were even able to serve through agencies from other countries. Dr Kool sees this as evidence of the persistence of the spiritual and the personal over the material and social and that it is thereby a disproof of communist theory. One would have to say that whatever the flaws of Marxist materialism, it was a close call, and this reviewer would not want to build a theory out of the results given the number of times political realities did frustrate mission. The major value of this thesis is its patient documentation of the narrative history more than its contribution to grand theories about religion and Marxism. At the same time for those who actually experienced life under Communism, the fact that people of faith could resist social forces to follow God's call in mission is a testimony that remains important, and it speaks powerfully to others.

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