

## “NO OTHER NAME” – AN EVANGELICAL CONVICTION

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A slightly revised version of a paper presented in October 1979 at a conference on “Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism,” and originally published as a chapter in a book of that title. In this paper I was acting as spokesperson for the World Evangelical Fellowship; my views today have evolved somewhat. Spirited responses to my paper were presented by Margethe B. J. Brown and Thomas Stransky, C.S.P. and can be read in *Christ’s Lordship and Religious Pluralism*, Anderson and Stransky, eds., Orbis Books, 1981. Twenty five years later, a portion of this paper has been reprinted in *Interfaith Theology: A Reader*, by Dan Cohn-Sherbok (2001)

### Introduction

Let me acknowledge the obvious: I am using the term evangelical as a matter of convenience. I am aware that it is properly appropriated, for example, by German Lutherans and Latin American Protestants of all kinds. But I will employ the term in a narrower sense to refer to those Christians who, in some circles at least, are commonly called “conservative evangelicals.” While that phrase too is not altogether inappropriate, I find it a bit cumbersome.

When I speak of evangelicals I have in mind those who are associated in various ways with the World Evangelical Fellowship, which I serve as general secretary, as well as those who would find themselves in general sympathy with the first three sections of the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, particularly paragraph 2, “The Authority and Power of the Bible.”

Elsewhere I have described evangelicals as those who, historically, have placed a high premium on the authority of Scripture, the necessity for new birth, the cultivation of private devotional habits, and the imperative of world evangelization. Many evangelicals are found in separatist churches, but others, including myself, are members of mainline denominations, in my case, Presbyterian.

### THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Evangelicals are a biblical oriented people. Precisely because the theme of Christ’s lordship is biblically grounded, it becomes inescapable to evangelicals. It is not a human insight but a divine revelation, which must be maintained and obeyed at all costs. “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,” the Lord Jesus responded to Peter after the latter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi, “but my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). I take it that as Christians we do not question but, rather, assume Christ’s lordship and

therefore simply seek to understand the meaning, implications, and expressions of it in the context of religious pluralism.

To begin with, evangelicals cannot separate the lordship of Christ from the historical figure of Jesus, nor from the historic name of Jesus. The historical Jesus whom doubting Thomas was invited to touch is the very one who invokes the response, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

After Jesus' ascension, angels declared, "Men of Galilee...*this Jesus*, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11), italics added). It is the Jesus of Nazareth who came to Israel preaching good news of peace who is proclaimed Lord of all by Peter to a Gentile seeker (Acts 10:36). And it is at the name of this same Jesus that "every knee should bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).

Thus the Lausanne Covenant declares: We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the Gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ speaks equally through all religions and theologies.

The issue of the translatability of the name of Jesus, which Donald Dawe has raised, is therefore of special concern to evangelicals. We would agree that the name of Jesus is no magical formula. Nor should it be the basis for a new legalism. But we are uneasy with the idea that the name of Jesus is merely the "disclosure of the pattern of God's action in human history," which Dawe takes as the basis for understanding the particularity and universality of Christianity.

What disturbs me as an evangelical is the phrase "pattern...of action." There seems to be something cyclical, something repetitive, implied in the phrase that stands in opposition to the definitiveness of the one, universally efficacious act at Calvary. "But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26).

This passage does not suggest that Jesus' atoning death was the pattern for God's saving acts in Jewish history but, rather, that God's saving acts in history pointed to (were a pattern for) his definitive act at the cross. Thus to evangelicals there is much more to the death and resurrection of Jesus than "the encoding of a pattern of existence" marked by finding life through dying to self, and operating throughout the world under the names of many religious traditions.

Rather than translating the name of Jesus into some universal philosophical or religious concept, evangelicals are more concerned to proclaim the universal and definitive consequences of the concrete once-for-all event that occurred at the cross. We would be less likely to utilize Calvary to illumine patterns of self-giving in other religions than to utilize such patterns to illumine the significance of Calvary.

#### THE GREAT COMMISSION

Another facet of Christ's lordship relates to the Great Commission. "*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Go therefore* and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-19, italics added). The missionary movement – traditionally focused on cross-cultural evangelism, conversion, church-planting, discipling, and service – has been and continues to be for evangelicals an authentic expression of the lordship of Christ in a religiously pluralistic world.

It is not the only expression and, in certain situations, not necessarily the initial expression, but it is nevertheless a major expression. Within the missionary movement evangelicals see concepts of Christian presence, dialogue, and the struggle against unjust social systems as contributing to, in one way or another, the actual proclamation of Jesus' death, resurrection and kingly rule.

When I speak of the missionary enterprise, I do not mean the Western missionary movement only. Today there are over four hundred so-called Third World missions. Most of them are evangelical in orientation, engaged in cross-cultural discipling activities in obedience to the Lord's command. To date they have fielded more than 3,000 missionaries in at least fifty countries.

The missionary department of ECWA (the Evangelical Churches of West Africa), for instance, has sent out over 200 missionary couples. Eight indigenous missionary societies have banded together to form the Indian Evangelical Missions Association, headquartered in Bangalore. The World Evangelical Fellowship has established an international Missions commission, one objective of which is to promote cooperation among these Third World missions, and between them and the older Western mission societies.

Another objective of WEF's Missions Commission is to stimulate the development of a new missiology more relevant to a world of religious pluralism. While not convinced that the continuity/discontinuity debate is fruitless, we do recognize that it has been carried on primarily by and

from the West. New conceptual categories may therefore be required if the Great Commission is to be fulfilled in our day and age, as Gerald Anderson has suggested.

We suspect that these will emerge from the experience of Third world mission leaders submitted to the lordship of Christ, and from Christian communities in Asia and Africa that undergird them. It is doubtful, however, that the line Choan-Seng Song has taken in his book *Christian Mission in Reconstruction – An Asian Analysis* is likely to be embraced by Third World evangelical leaders.

#### TRIUMPHALISM

An earlier generation of evangelicals (indeed, church-people of all shades of theological opinion) expected Christianity to prevail over all the earth. They saw the then- embryonic missionary movement as a means to this end. As early as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the great evangelical Jonathan Edwards anticipated this expansion of Christianity and prophesied, “Then all countries and nations, even those which are not most ignorant, shall be full of light and knowledge...There shall then be universal peace and a good understanding among the nations of the world...Then shall all the world be united in one amiable society...All the world shall then be as one church, one orderly, regular, beautiful society.”

This truly triumphalistic, amillennial vision characterized a great deal of both evangelical and liberal thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well. Ninety five years ago (1884) Josiah Strong served as general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in the United States. According to Strong,

“God, in his infinite wisdom and skill, is training the Anglo-Saxon race for an hour sure to come in the world’s future...This race of unequaled energy, with all the majesty of numbers and might of wealth behind it – the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization – having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth.”

Similarly, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Churchill King, then president of Oberlin College and a spokesperson for the liberal cause, could denounce American imperialism while virtually underscoring the religious triumphalism of Edwards and Strong.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, evangelical thinking has changed considerably. Under the influence of dispensational theology, with its associated premillennialism, evangelicals have accepted the fact of continuous religious pluralism. We do not expect the walls of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or communism, for that matter, to come tumbling down. To change the metaphor, and to quote Jesus in a context some may find offensive, we expect the wheat and the tares to “grow together” until the harvest, the end of the world (Matthew 13:30).

In place of the disintegration of entire religious systems and their replacement by the Christian faith, evangelicals speak more often today of the Lord “taking out a people for his name” (Acts 15:14). In this perspective evangelicals see the missionary movement as a means of planting churches within as many cultural units of the world’s population as possible. A great deal of current evangelical interest focuses on the estimated 16,750 cultural units (“hidden peoples”) still unreached by any Christian witness.

This too is a kind of triumphalism, of course, but of a more modest nature. It is anticipated that by sowing the gospel like seed throughout the great religious regions of humankind evangelical communities will spring up, which will (in the gloomier scenario) act as lifeboats, rescuing men and women from ungodly cultures, or (in the more optimistic scenarios) ferment like yeast to make the surrounding cultures “more Christian.”

In other words, contemporary evangelical concern focuses on evangelization as the proclamation of the gospel in every nation, rather than the conquest of religions per se, or the total conversion of religiously based cultures. If, as a result of proclaiming the gospel, a particular people – tribe, caste, or other – turns to Christ in toto, well and good. If it does not, the mandate to preach the gospel to every culture and make disciples in all nations remains. The Great Commission, to our knowledge, has never been rescinded.

#### THE SERVANT LORD

After the Lord Jesus had defended the right of his disciples, against the religiously based socioeconomic system of his day, to pluck grain on the Sabbath to assuage their hunger – and after he had healed a man on the Sabbath, again in confrontation with the leaders of his nation – Matthew the evangelist interprets Jesus’ action in these words (Matthew 12:17-21), “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah [42:1-4]:

‘Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,

my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles.  
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;  
he will not break a bruised reed  
or quench a smoldering wick,  
till he brings justice to victory;  
and in his name will the Gentiles hope.”

Jesus the Lord is the lord of justice. He is the Spirit-filled Servant whose mission it is to proclaim justice to the nations. He is the persevering one who will bring justice to victory. He is the ultimate hope of the nations. Followers of Jesus will acknowledge and respond to his lordship by working for justice everywhere. It is common knowledge that much of the injustice present in our global society is the result of religious bias and intolerance. Within the context of Christianity, *apartheid* comes immediately to mind. But the phenomenon is not limited to Christianity.

In the midst of religious pluralism Christians must be prepared to cooperate with peoples of other faiths in rectifying situations inimical to human welfare and promoting activities that aim at establishing justice. Whether all evangelicals are prepared to cooperate so intimately is still a moot question. At the very least, all of us should strive to correct injustices that exist within our own communities or that stem from the impact of our activities, not least our missionary activities, in other countries.

#### SIN AND THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Underlying the evangelical perspective and approach is a biblically informed theology of human sin and its religious expressions that is in stark contrast to that held by many Christians engaged in interreligious dialogue today. Donald Dawe, for example, citing Ezekiel's admonition of Jerusalem, (“she has wickedly rebelled against my ordinances more than the nations”) suggests that this means other nations had a knowledge of the law to which they were more faithful than the Chosen People.

Evangelicals reading the same passage would understand Ezekiel to be evaluating levels of rebellion, not levels of faithfulness! That the nations have knowledge of God is admitted. But Ezekiel's emphasis is on the fact that all peoples react to that knowledge by rebellion, not obedience, some more so than others, perhaps. “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God, or give thanks to him” (Romans 1:21).

I draw attention to Dawe's comment, not to take issue with the main point he was making in context – that the Covenant People are not exempt from divine judgment while all other peoples can expect only judgment – for his point is surely valid. Rather, I am suggesting that his reading of Scripture and his objection to triumphalism appears to stem in part from presuppositions regarding man and religion that evangelicals would seriously question.

The Lausanne Covenant states: We recognize that all men have some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for men suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. Evangelicals see in the biblical testimony a low view, not a high view, of religions.

Surely this is true of the Old Testament witness where idols are known to be human-made and consequently powerless to save (Isaiah 44:9ff). Evangelicals do not perceive a significantly different evaluation in New Testament writings. The Roman Cornelius, for example, was a prayerful, benevolent, sincere man who, nevertheless, had neither salvation nor life (Acts 11:14, 18) until the gospel was proclaimed to him.

Furthermore, the biblical witness cannot be said to stem from an isolated experience vis a vis the religions of the world. Israel's contact with Egypt, Canaan, Syria, Babylon and Persia, and the early church's experience with the intense and highly diversified ferment of the Greco-Roman world, was both extensive and intensive.

Evangelicals are aware that God is constantly active in the Christian and non-Christian world alike. He has not left himself without witness. He is not far from anyone. He gives light to everyone. He reveals himself in nature and his light, which "is plain" and can be "clearly perceived" (Romans 1:19-20), may very well be reflected, in greater or lesser degree, in the religions of humanity. Yet people reject the awareness they have. They do not acknowledge God in truth. They utilize their religiosity to escape from God. This is as patently true of the Christian religion in its cultural expressions as it is of other religions.

I am aware that this relation of the gospel to the world's religions is hardly distinguishable from Hendrik Kraemer's thesis of "radical discontinuity" and that many Christian thinkers, including my good friend, Gerald Anderson, see this as a dead-end concept. Yet evangelicals would insist that a low view of religions as the means of ultimate revelation does not preclude appreciation for, and even a high view of, world religions as cultural expressions of

humankind's drives and, consequently, a high view of the possibilities of interreligious dialogue.

That is, evangelicals do not see interreligious dialogue as a means for discovering God but as a way of understanding humankind, and an opportunity to experience and express solidarity with our fellow human beings.

A biblical view of the faiths of humankind is not a dead end. Rather, it is a narrow way provided by a gracious Providence to guide us into fruitful dialogue with others. "Salvation is of the Jews," Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman (John 4:22). Was this merely a chauvinistic assertion on Jesus' part? Hardly! Was it not, rather, his candid evaluation of the Samaritan religion? And was it not a pointer to what God has done (or was about to do) for humankind in a particular historical person and event?

#### EVANGELICALS IN DIALOGUE

At a recent consultation avid Hesselgrave of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School called on evangelicals to review their attitude of disinterest and nonparticipation in dialogue. In a world of religious pluralism, he said, evangelical witness, preaching, and teaching should become increasingly dialogical. He had several types of dialogue in mind, including dialogue on the nature of dialogue, interreligious dialogue to promote freedom of worship and witness, dialogue concerned with meeting human need, dialogue designed to bread down barriers of distrust within the religious world, and dialogue that has as its objective mutual comprehension of conflicting truth claims.

Hesselgrave's brief list does not exhaust the possible dialogical responses to religious pluralism. Indeed, it is as revealing for what it leaves out as for what it includes. What is of more immediate interest, however, is the response that participants in the consultation – all evangelicals – made to Hesselgrave's call. Their response was virtually nil.

Consequently, Hesselgrave concluded that "for whatever reasons, evangelicals are not really ready for any of the five types of interreligious dialogue proposed in my paper." He went on to note that perhaps that is the way it should be. "Certainly," he said, "until such a time as the position of evangelicals is clearly understood by both non-evangelical participants and a wider evangelical constituency, the cause of biblical Christianity, at least, is better off without their participation.

It would be neither far no accurate to extend Hesselgrave's conclusions too far. He was speaking in a North American context. Evangelicals outside North Ameri-

ca frequently have a more open approach to non-Christian religions and to interreligious dialogue. Even within the North American evangelical community there are a number of individuals and groups prepared to dialogue with others, anticipating mutual benefit in doing so.

At this point it may be useful to indicate briefly the extent to which some evangelicals are currently engaged in interreligious dialogue. The Overseas Ministries Study Center regularly sponsors gatherings in which evangelicals have opportunity to interface with ecumenically oriented Protestants and Roman Catholics. In 1978 in Venice, under the patronage of Cardinal Luciani (later Pope John Paul I), eight evangelical leaders met with an equal number of Catholic theologians to discuss "signs of convergence" in their respective understandings of mission. A follow-up consultation is being planned. I myself maintain regular contact with the Catholic charismatic office in Brussels. Evangelical and Jewish leaders also have met together to discuss issues of theology and history.

The Evangelical Alliance of Great Britain has authorized a commission "to clarify issues of interfaith dialogue." Last year the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians emphasized the necessity of dialogue between evangelicals and Marxists. Not long after, Ernest Oliver, past chairperson of the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, called on "faith missions" (a peculiarly evangelical phenomenon) to get better acquainted with the psychological and religious sources of non-Christian religions. Meanwhile in Singapore, at the 1978 Asian Leaders Conference on Evangelism, S. V. Bhajjan of the Henry Martyn Institute reported on an evangelical dialogue with Muslims in India which started in 1963 and continues to this day.

All of this together does not add up to very much, perhaps, in the eyes of those who have been involved in interreligious dialogue for many years in a variety of circumstances. Yet I submit that it is an indication that some evangelicals are coming to understand dialogue as an expression of the lordship of Christ and are actively engaging in it. To this extent, David Hesselgrave's pessimistic conclusion, noted above, can be modified somewhat.

#### THE SEARCH FOR NEW MODELS OF MISSION

If I am not mistaken, the living memory of Christians provides three basic contextual models for relating to other faiths. These are 1) the Greco-Roman model, which presumes mission in the context of a high civilized (i.e., urban-

ized) culture in process of decay; 2) the tribal model, of which Europe after the fall of the Roman empire is the prototype; and 3) the Islamic model, which represents mission to a cohesive, self-confident, even aggressive culture.

Drawing upon its collective memory, the church in mission in modern times has responded by a) trying to create alternate societies within supposedly corrupt cultures – e.g. by planting “Christian” villages; b) providing the religious base for a civilizing mission – establishing liberal arts colleges and vocational training institutes; and c) treating other faiths as “the enemy” – adopting a polemical, confrontational approach. The inadequacies of all three approaches have become obvious to our generation, including thoughtful evangelicals. Ever since the Jerusalem missionary conference in 1928 the church at large has been searching for a new model. It has not yet emerged, though several trial balloons, such as Anton Stadler’s “dialogical apologetics” have been floated.

Evangelicals have participated in this quest to only a limited degree. As a consequence of our failure to interact seriously with other religions in depth, evangelicals are confronted by a range of troublesome questions. Some of these have been listed by Jack Shepherd of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. They include

- The sheer incredibility, to the modern person, of an exclusivist approach;
- The partialness of the Bible’s teaching on the subject;
- The true meaning of ‘faith’ in biblical terms;
- The real significance of ‘no other name;’ and
- The consequence for the redemption of individuals of the realization that God is always at work in the world outside the range of gospel proclamation.

Another troublesome issue relates to the fact that the world’s religions appear to meet the psychological and religious needs of many people. My own experience as a missionary to Muslims confirms this. Along the same line, I personally have long been disturbed when trying to come to grips with the apparent evidence of true faith and awareness of grace in Sufi writings and in the lives of some ordinary Muslim individuals. Is the God they worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? How can I be certain, as Raimundo Panikkar suggests, short of total immersion in the other religious experience, with its risk of my own conversion?

All the same, I wonder if evangelicals do not have some positive contributions to make to others engaged in interreligious dialogue, even though the traditional evangelical approach carries the onus of familiarity? After all, evangelicals make up the greater part of the Protestant missionary force in our time. This being so, it would seem to be advantageous for ecumenically oriented leaders to interact with evangelicals. But such interaction can hardly be expected if there is not a mutual readiness to listen and learn.

It is not at all uncommon to hear evangelicals express the wish that ecumenists would exhibit the same irenic spirit toward evangelicals that they do toward non-Christians. Not long ago, in reviewing the symposium, *Faith in the Midst of Faiths*, a report of the Chiang Mai Consultation sponsored by the World Council of Churches, the reviewer dismissed out of hand one Bible study contributed by a respected evangelical theologian. Two other Bible studies, by other scholars, he suggested, could be read profitably by all Christians concerned with dialogue. Presumably they were more compatible with his own thinking. This kind of brush-off, all too common, causes evangelicals to approach dialogue with other Christians skeptically.

The specific contribution evangelicals might make to the larger enterprise will be evaluated ultimately by the actual participants. But if I were to suggest possible contributions, they would include 1) our concern for faithfulness to what the Bible positively teaches in relation to dialogue; 2) insights into the phenomenon of "conversion" with which we have extensive experience and which should throw some light both on the gospel and on other religions; and 3) the corrective influence brought to bear by our insistence that all religious systems, including our own, harbor demonic elements and therefore stand under God's judgment.

First, the positive biblical witness in relation to dialogue. Luke, for example, frequently employs the verb *dialegomai* to describe Paul's approach to people of other faiths. Yet this is dialogue of a particular kind, significantly different from that advocated today. It is dialogue subordinate to proclamation. This shows up clearly in Paul's ministry at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4). In this passage, five verbal forms are brought together: proclaim, explaining, argued (*dielexato*), proving, and persuaded. John Stott, one of the architects of the Lausanne Covenant, points out that the subject of Paul's dialogue was always one he chose himself, namely, Jesus Christ as Lord, and his object always was conversion to Jesus.

I cite this example not to suggest that contemporary concepts of dialogue are altogether wrong, but that they do not do justice to the full biblical record and are, to that extent, inadequate. Even if they should prove to be very useful at a certain stage of relationships between people of different faiths, it would be a pity if other biblical dimensions of dialogue were lost sight of. True dialogue inevitably leads to encounter, which may engender confrontation as well as harmony and understanding.

Second, the possibility of losing sight of the very real phenomenon of conversion. At the 1976 consultation held at Washington and Lee University, Alfred Krass, co-editor of *The Other Side*, a journal of evangelical social action, described his conversion to Christ from an agnostic Jewish background. According to Krass, when as a college student he first heard the message "Jesus Christ is Lord," he understood it in an exclusivist sense. This offended him.

"But," he continues, "as I searched the Scriptures, I saw no other way conformed to the records. It was only after I had accepted this unbending Christ that I was able to make the historically prior affirmation (which had always earlier struck me as an affront to the modern mind): that *my* people, Israel, were God's chosen people. In both matters, it was "the scandal of particularity" that had offended me. But in both cases I found that in his strange economy God does work through the historically particular..."

In my own ministry as general secretary of the World Evangelical Fellowship I continually meet women and men of Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious backgrounds who have converted to Jesus as Lord precisely as that has been traditionally understood by Christians for centuries and is still understood by evangelicals today. At the human level I have even been the instrument of a number of such conversions.

This is a phenomenon that our generation should investigate in depth for insights that would surely emerge, and the findings applied to interreligious dialogue. Are all these conversions to be regarded as blunders? Is God to be faulted for overtaking the impeccable and zealous Pharisee, Saul, and confronting him with Jesus Christ the Lord? I do not see much evidence of this kind of serious investigation in ecumenical discussions.

Third, the necessity of keeping alert to the demonic in religion. It seems to evangelicals that contemporary dialogical theology underestimates the reality of the demonic dimension. "Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Consequently God sends his

messengers “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified in me” (Acts 26:17-18).

Thus the evangelical emphasis on proclamation – admittedly often to the neglect of legitimate dialogue, presence and social action – is nevertheless a prophetic ministry that is fully warranted, even necessitated, by the biblical perspective. Will this be lost sight of in Christian approaches today apart from evangelical participation?