

## EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: ROCK OR REEF?

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### Introduction

Karl Barth once defined evangelical theology as “theology informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ as heard afresh in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation by a direct return to the Holy Scriptures.” As a one-sentence definition this statement can hardly be surpassed, but for our purpose it needs to be expanded a little.

Barth, in true continental fashion, was using the word ‘evangelical’ virtually as synonymous with ‘Protestant,’ whereas in the context of this Round Table the word will be used in both a broader and narrower sense. Broader because most of us recognize the persistence of certain evangelical themes in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism down through the centuries. And narrower because the original Protestant experience has subsequently been modified by such European movements as Pietism, Puritanism, and Wesleyanism; and in North America by Revivalism, Fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism.

Can a genuinely systematic theology be articulated from such a disparate heritage? Probably it can. Since the message of faith is rational, it can be understood. Yet God’s truth is also suprarational, so there is mystery and paradox in evangelical theologies, as in all.

We can never, as Donald Bloesch sagely notes, achieve “a closed, airtight, logically consistent, perfected system of truth.” Moreover, in addition to being rational and suprarational, evangelical theology is also existential and, therefore, to some extent irrational. It reflects the crisis experiences believing communities have had during the past four hundred years. These have left enduring marks as evangelicals have tried to rationalize those experiences *ex post facto*.

Finally, we must note that there are important distinctions to be made within evangelical theology: between essentials and non-essentials, between peculiarly evangelical doctrines and those we hold in common with other Christians, and between doctrines which need to be emphasized at a particular time and place as opposed to another time and

place. It is precisely these distinctions that give rise to the reef-like quality of evangelical theology upon which the future of evangelical identity, unity and joint action is so easily jeopardized. You will recall Dr. Honeycutt's earlier description of Southern Baptists as a denomination in search of its soul.

### A Case Study

The potential that evangelical theology has for providing a reliable foundation – a bedrock – for identity, unity and joint action, as well as its latent capacity for destructiveness, is nicely illustrated in the earliest concerted effort to unite evangelicals ecumenically, that is, globally. The year was 1846; the place, London. The occasion – as significant in its own day as the Berlin or Lausanne Congresses have been in ours – was the Inaugural Conference of the Evangelical Alliance, later to be known as the World Evangelical Fellowship. Eight hundred leaders from fifty denominations in Great Britain, North America and various continental countries were present.

In his opening remarks the chairperson, Sir Culling Eardly Smith, allowed himself to exaggerate a bit, perhaps, when he declared, "This is the first experiment which has been made to combine the interests of truth and love." His reference to love reflected the pent-up desire of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals, following decades of cooperation in the mission fields, to transcend sectarian divisions and come together in a worldwide fellowship. His reference to truth, on the other hand, drew attention to the heroic efforts made in a three-day meeting in Liverpool prior to the Inaugural Conference to develop a statement of doctrine that would serve as a theological basis for the proposed Alliance.

Dr. R. S. Candlish of the Free Church of Scotland headed up the committee that developed the statement of faith. Up to the last minute it appeared the committee would fail in its task. "But a quarter of an hour after the allotted time, amid rapturous scenes, unanimous approval was achieved" on eight points. These covered Scripture, the Godhead, human nature, incarnation and atonement, justification, the Holy Spirit, private judgment in interpretation, and the ministry and ordinances.

At the insistence of the Americans present, the statement was later expanded by one point to cover ultimate destinies. Since then, in the intervening 140 years, this statement has been utilized by scores, even hundreds, of churches and parachurch organizations. Its phrases have

become so deadenly familiar that it is difficult to conceive of it as having been semantically innovative at the time. Yet as Dr. Candlish explained, “The committee had agreed that the statement should not be expressed in the words of the older confessions” but should be “framed anew to suit the exigencies of modern times.

The object of this exercise was to produce “a selection, not a compendium,” of scriptural truth to speak to the issue of what constituted “the prominent characteristics of the designation evangelical.” Consequently, it is interesting to note that the statement did not deal with the second coming of Christ, the relation of the believer to the law, the doctrine of the church, or New Testament ethics and social justice. These were not considered to be strictly evangelical, as opposed to generally Christian, distinctives.

In the words of J. A. B. Kessler, Jr., the historian of the Alliance, “the doctrinal basis agreed upon was clearly a compromise achieved by adapting it to the needs of the majority, but it did unite both this conference and the movement during its early years. As such it proved [the] contention that truth has a unifying effect on Christians, and it is sad that in later times Christians could have so forgotten this as to coin the phrase, ‘work unites, doctrine divides.’”

Yet along with the rock there was the reef, initially submerged but dangerous present in the issue of slavery. Great Britain had recently abolished slavery, in large measure because of the efforts of British evangelicals, but the United States and several European countries had not yet done so. The British were adamant that slaveholders should be barred from an ecumenical Alliance. Both they and their American opponents pressed their arguments on theological grounds. The ensuing debate raged on for four days and took up 180 closely packed pages of the recorded proceedings. As a result, with no meeting of minds in sight, the Alliance was finally organized not as an ecumenical union, which was the original intent, but as a set of loosely affiliated but autonomous national bodies.

The consequences of that initial misadventure were long-lived. Dissatisfaction with what many perceived to be a theologically weak arrangement gave rise, over time, to the modern ecumenical movement and the formation in 1948 of the World Council of Churches. Moreover, the inability of evangelicals to unite more closely because of theological differences on penultimate matters, has proved to be a major source of weakness not only in the World Evangelical Fellowship as it exists today but in the evangelical movement as a whole.

## Centers of Current Conflict

In his two-volume *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* Donald Bloesch suggests that the present day controversy in evangelicalism revolves around four issues: biblical authority, eschatology, election and reprobation, and the gifts of the Spirit. As an example of the latter we note that Fuller Theological Seminary recently cancelled its popular “Signs and Wonders” course on the grounds, as I understand it, that the course was not sophisticated enough theologically.

As for biblical authority, the “holy war” rampant within the Southern Baptist Convention today provides a clear illustration. Whatever non-theological facts are involved (and admittedly there are some) the issue at the forefront of the controversy has to do with Scripture, and specifically the concept of inerrancy.

Individuals as well as issues may become the focal point of theologically based evangelical quarrels. Robert Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame, with his “creation theology,” is a case in point. So also is Eastern Baptist College’s own Tony Campolo, struck from the speaker’s list at a national youth conference because of alleged heretical statements in his book, *A Reasonable Faith*.

More serious for professional theologians is the instance of Robert Gundry, forced to resign from the Evangelical Theological Society on the basis that his use of redaction criticism, in his commentary on Matthew, is incompatible with the stance of the society. With Gundry’s situation in mind, Baptist theologian David Scholer asserts that “in one sense, redaction criticism has become the test concept for this generation of [evangelical] scholars about what are the limits and possibilities of meshing biblical criticism [with] an inerrant view of Scripture.”

Important theological conflicts emerge also from the social context of our time. The evangelicalness of liberation theologies is one example. Feminism clearly is another, even within evangelical denominations with a history of ordaining women to the ministry. Abortion is another issue fraught with theological overtones and capable of causing shipwreck – as when InterVarsity Press withdrew from distribution D. Gareth Jones’ *Brave New People* despite endorsements from evangelical theologians of the stature of Henry, Kantzer, and Smedes. Earlier Joel Nederhood reminded us of the theological implications of evangelical response to public expectations in the use of mass media technology.

Evangelical theologians, both lay and professional, are sharply divided in current debates in this country over

the nature of national security, biogenetics, the legitimacy of the sanctuary movement, and the plight of the poor and disinherited in America and in the world at large. Both the Moral Majority and Evangelicals for Social Action appeal to Scripture for support.

Finally, disputations arise with respect to the identity of the evangelical community itself. Is the charismatic movement an evangelical phenomenon? Are Seventh Day Adventists evangelical? What about the new Evangelical Orthodox Church which has applied for membership in the National Association of Evangelicals and, at the same time, is seeking official recognition as a member of the worldwide Eastern Orthodox communion? And is Gordon College, avowedly evangelical, justified in ruling unilaterally that Roman Catholics cannot with integrity sign its statement of faith?

### The Future of Evangelical Theology

Turning from the present to the near and intermediate future, it is essential to acknowledge what was alluded to earlier, namely, that truth is not only rational and supra-rational, but experiential and therefore sometimes irrational. Evangelical theology is always in some measure a rationalization after the fact, an ordering of realities as perceived by believers in existential crises. Behind each expression of evangelical theology there is not only an intellectually astute though culturally conditioned thinker, but an evangelical *experience* in which the gospel is felt and obeyed in new ways. As Jesus pointed out, it is in the commitment to do God' will that the perception of God's truth is assured (John 7:17).

Even though evangelical theology carries forward Scriptural truths preserved by the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformation churches, it also incorporates and tries to systematize the experiences we label Pietism, Wesleyanism, Fundamentalism, etc. In our century the Pentecostal experience is sure the most notable example. Only now, after three or more generations, are young Pentecostal and charismatic scholars, such as Peter Kuzmic and Roger Stronstad, beginning to develop first-rate theologies.

By the same token, it is altogether likely that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century new elements of systematic evangelical theology will emerge from the reflective experiences of Third World evangelical communities. What these will involve is impossible to predict, though one could hazard educated guesses in the direction of further reinforcement and modify-

cation of the Pentecostal strand, plus new developments in the areas of social justice, family relations, ecclesiology and inter-religious dialogue.

If during the past four hundred years alone, Western evangelicalism has produced the six major movements I have referred to, with the theological systems that rationalize them, what will Third World evangelicals produce in the centuries ahead? Truly evangelical theology is a *theologia viatorum* [a theology of wayfarers], not a *theologia comprehensorum* [a theology of those who have 'arrived' conceptually].

How then can we accommodate ourselves and prepare our believing communities for these changes? How can we ensure that evangelical theology will serve as rock more than reef in the years ahead? One way, since theology per se remains an intellectual enterprise, is to become more self-aware of the mental categories in which we operate. Paul Hiebert of Fuller Seminary has suggested that we think in terms of "sets."

Modern mathematicians and logicians such as Zadeh, Cohen and Hersh have demonstrated that human beings create categories in several ways, each of which has its own structural characteristics. These categories are called "sets," and the three most basic have been labeled "bounded sets," "centered sets," and "fuzzy sets." (This nomenclature obviously reflects Western origins.)

The "bounded" set is defined by its clear, sharp, static boundary. The category is created mentally by listing the essential characteristics an object must have to be included within the set. Most of the effort spent in defining the category is spent on defining and maintaining the boundary. The central question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the boundary. There is an excluded middle.

"Centered" sets, on the other hand, are created by defining a center and the relationship of things to that center. Although the centered set does not place its primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear distinction between things moving toward the center and those moving away. As in the case of bounded sets, there is in the centered set an excluded middle. Centered sets reflect variation and dynamism within a category. Movement is essential to their structure.

"Fuzzy" sets, by contrast, have no clear boundaries. They may be defined either in terms of what things are intrinsically (as with bounded sets) or how things related to some center or point of reference (as with centered sets). There are degrees of exclusion within the set. Because of the

fuzzy boundary, a thing may belong to two or more categories at the same time, or may be both within and outside of the set simultaneously.

There is no excluded middle in fuzzy set algebra or logic. Instead of a sharply divided either/or world, there are continuums. There is paradox but not contradiction. Changes may occur, either in the intrinsic character of things, or in their relationships or directions, but these changes are incremental more than radically transformational.

All cultures, it is true, seem to utilize all three ways of creating categories, but each culture seems to focus on one of the three as its basis for building its worldview. Western cultures utilized bounded and, to a lesser degree, centered set thinking. Many, if not most Third World cultures use fuzzy set thinking. Indian traditional music, for instance, is marked by glides. Its economy has no fixed prices. Its roads have blurred edges.

Now the point is this: on the surface, a fuzzy set approach would seem incompatible with biblical or evangelical theology. It certainly contradicts our traditional Western way of doing theology. Yet we know that within a few decades there are likely to be more non-Western evangelicals in the world than Western. Among them will be some theologians conditioned subconsciously by millennia of fuzzy set thinking. What will this do to evangelical theology? Ought not Western theologians, even now, be making stronger efforts to understand Third World ways of constructing mental categories?

Bounded set thinking, on the other hand, is quintessentially Western. It is characteristic of all Hellenic-influenced thought processes, including some we find reflected in parts of the New Testament. There is reason to believe that “scholastic” or super-rational types of evangelical theology, including fundamentalism but not limited to it, are the natural product of bounded set thinkers. And there is evidence to spare to support the conviction that bounded set thinking is the source of most of the divisiveness that plagues evangelism – that is to say, the source of the reef-like quality of evangelical theology even when it poses as bedrock.

## Conclusion

It may be that the cultivation of centered set thinking is what we most need today. Paul Hiebert has concluded that “a centered set approach seems to correspond most

closely with the Hebraic view of reality found in the Bible.” If this be so, there is reason to hop that we may eventually overcome the rock/reef dichotomy of evangelical theology. With its commitment to defined boundaries, centered set conceptualizing has at least some common ground with the bounded set approach that has dominated past theological effort. But its emphasis on relations and dynamics may offer a point of contact with the fuzzy set thinking likely to characterize theological work emanating from Third World contexts, especially as Third World evangelical theologians free themselves from subservience to Western scholarship. At least the possibility merits consideration.