

# WHAT IS EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?

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*Is the Evangelical Movement a mood or a system of beliefs or propositions? Are evangelicals agreed on the essentials? What issues are unanswered? These are themes Professor Runia, the well known European theologian, addresses in this wide ranging article. He notes that the modern Evangelical Movement has produced few confessions of faith and argues for the need to see divine revelation as a whole.*

Editor

This paper was originally written as a chapter in a book about the Evangelical Movement in The Netherlands. During the last twenty years this movement has been growing considerably, and what I like in particular is the fact that in recent years it has been growing within the historical churches. Of late they have even organized a fellowship of evangelical ministers within these historical churches. And to present themselves to the churches and to their colleagues they wrote a book on evangelicalism.

They asked me to write a chapter on the question: 'What is evangelical theology?' In itself this seems to be a

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very simple question, but in reality it is hard to answer.

I begin with some general remarks.

**First** of all we have to ask ourselves: Is there really an evangelical theology? Is this movement and its theology not too complex and too variegated for us to be able to speak of evangelical theology as a clearly definable entity?

A Dutch sociologist of religion who studied the movement in the Netherlands arrived at the following description: 'It is a conglomerate of fundamentalists, premillennialists, moderate and radical evangelicals, in short: groups of believers who differ from each other on many points of their beliefs.'<sup>1</sup>

This corresponds with my own experiences in FEET, the Fellowship

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1. H. C. Stoffels, *Wandelen in het licht*, (1990), p. 72.

of European Evangelical Theologians which was founded after The Lausanne Congress in 1974 and of which I have been chairman for fourteen years. At our biennial conference there is always a great variety of theologians and theologies. From England there are Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists and Pentecostals. From Germany there are Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Pentecostal theologians. Among the Dutch participants we encounter various kinds of Reformed theologians (belonging to different Reformed churches) and also some Baptists. All these people are very much aware of their theological 'roots', and from conviction they stand in their own theological tradition. At the same time they consider themselves evangelicals.

It is quite obvious that within the context of such a wide variety it is impossible to speak of a *united* and *uniform* evangelical theology. The American evangelical Donald Bloesch says that evangelicalism is a 'mood' rather than a 'theological system'. Carl Henry expresses it somewhat differently: 'Evangelicalism is as much a temperament as a theology.' Ralph Winter says it very succinctly: 'It is a movement, not a theology.'<sup>2</sup>

In spite of all this it is possible to enumerate a number of features which can be found in nearly all evangelical theologians. I shall come back to that presently.

My **second** observation is that the growing interest in theology among evangelical theologians is a matter for

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2. R. Winter, *Christianity Today*, (1976), pp. 37ff.

rejoicing. In the past, in both the English-speaking and the German-speaking world, there was often an attitude of reluctance with regard to academic theology. Bloesch even speaks of an 'anti-theological bias'.

The main reason for this bias was the fact that in most universities and seminaries liberal theology dominated the scene and, unfortunately, all too often this liberal theology pulled evangelical students from their evangelical moorings. Naturally, by this negative attitude the Evangelical Movement itself strengthened the dominant stance of liberal theology. By turning their back on solid academic work they left the field to the others and forgot to arm their congregations and their own children against the attacks on the evangelical tradition. Too often the most intelligent among the evangelical young people were drawn into the liberal camp.

**Thirdly**, in their defence the evangelicals quite often resorted to a simplistic and literalistic quoting of Scripture. They would say: 'Yes, but Scripture says . . .' What they often did not realize was that they themselves were also using glasses for reading Scripture, namely, the glasses of their own tradition.

In our reading of Scripture we nearly always use the tinted glasses that were handed down to us by our spiritual ancestors. The German evangelical theologian W. Schlichting wrote: 'The blind spot of the biblicists is that they do not realize to what extent their own thinking is influenced by the time in which they live, by their predecessors and their surroundings—while they criticize

this attitude severely in others.<sup>3</sup> We should always remember that all theology, including our own evangelical theology, is 'contextual', that is, influenced and sometimes even shaped by the culture we live in.

My **fourth** and last observation is that evangelicals are often inclined to summarize the Christian faith in a number of 'main truths' or 'central propositions'. These more or less isolated and disconnected truths and propositions constitute the platform upon which evangelicals meet and recognize each other.

This occurred at the foundation of the first Evangelical Alliance in Britain, in the year 1846. The founding fathers selected nine propositions from their Protestant heritage and adopted them as the basis of the Alliance. Nearly all Evangelical Alliances and many other Evangelical Associations have followed this example.

The propositions adopted in 1846 were the following:

(1) The Divine Inspiration, Authority, and Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures. (2) The Right and Duty of Private Judgment in the Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. (3) The Unity of the Godhead, and the Trinity of Persons therein. (4) The utter Depravity of Human Nature, in consequence of the Fall. (5) The Incarnation of the Son of God, His work of Atonement for sinners of mankind, and His Mediatorial Intercession and Reign. (6) The Justification of the sinner by Faith alone. (7) The Work of the Spirit in the Conversion and

Sanctification of the sinner. (8) The Immortality of the Soul, the Resurrection of the Body, the Judgment of the World by our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Eternal Blessedness of the Righteous, and the Eternal Punishment of the Wicked. (9) The Divine Institution of the Christian Ministry, and the obligation and perpetuity of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.<sup>4</sup>

### TRADITIONS OF THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

Naturally these central propositions were not selected at random. There is a theological interrelationship between them, an interrelationship which results from the fact that the Evangelical Movement has its own 'tradition'.

One can discern at least three main 'layers' in this tradition.

a. The bottom-layer is the *Reformation of the 16th century*. Nearly all evangelicals trace their pedigree back to this Reformation. As a matter of fact, originally the term 'evangelical' was synonymous with 'reformational' and was the opposite of 'poperish' or 'papistic'. Evangelicals like to speak of the *solas* of the Reformation: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus* and *sola Scriptura*.

b. The second layer has a different name in the various European countries, but in each case there is a definite kinship between the movements concerned. For the English-speaking world I am thinking of *Puritanism*, for the German-speak-

4. Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, (1954), p. 320.

ing world of *Pietism* and for the Netherlands of the soc. '*Nadere Reformatie*', which literally means: the More Precise or Further Reformation with a view to both personal piety and personal morality.

c. The third layer is formed by the various *Revival Movements* in the 18th and 19th centuries. These movements occurred mainly in the English-speaking world, but in Germany and the Netherlands there were similar revivals.

In addition to these three main layers which are common to all evangelicals throughout the whole world, there are two more movements which had their beginnings in our own century and which have deeply influenced certain quarters of the Evangelical Movement.

In the first place I am thinking of the movement of *Fundamentalism* which in the period of 1910–1930, in reaction against liberal theology, had a great impact on American evangelicalism and, from America, also on European evangelicalism.

In the second place there is the *Pentecostal Movement*, which in the very first year of our century also started in America and gradually spread over the entire world. In the second half of this century it acquired its own place within the Evangelical Movement. The initial antagonism, especially among British evangelicals and German 'Evangelikalen', has little by little given way to a sympathetic hearing and tolerance. This happened in particular in the sixties when Pentecostal ideas, in the form of the so-called *Charismatic Movement*, acquired their own legitimate place within the historical churches.

A good and helpful summary of the main tenets of the evangelical faith and theology is to be found in the so-called Lausanne Covenant of 1974, which was drafted largely by John Stott.

Without wanting to minimize the influences of Fundamentalism and Pentecostalism, I still believe that the first three layers are decisive for the entire Evangelical Movement. One can trace the main emphases of evangelical theology via these three layers.

Naturally, they always exist within the various traditions of the countries concerned, and are therefore always coloured by their particular context. Anglican evangelicals are usually deeply influenced by the Calvinistic tradition and in many ways are rather 'Reformed' in their theology. British evangelicals belonging to the Free Churches or to the so-called Free Groups are usually more Arminian in their theology—often more unwittingly than intentionally—, while the Free Groups also show many marks of the Revival Movements.

German 'Evangelikalen' (the name was transliterated from the English word 'evangelicals', because in Germany the term 'evangelical' was already used by the Lutheran State Churches) find their roots in particular in Pietism and to a great extent also in the revival movements. Scandinavian evangelicals usually belong to the Lutheran State Churches, although there are also strong Free Churches, in particular in Norway.

The Dutch Evangelical Alliance consists mainly of people belonging to the so-called Free Groups who are usually deeply influenced by the ideas

3. W. Schlichting, *Theologische Beiträge*, (1975), pp. 163ff.

and ideals of the revival movement. At the same time there is an increasing number of ministers in the historical churches who consider themselves evangelicals. Last year they organized themselves in an association which has as its aim the spreading of evangelical ideas within the United Protestant Church, which will be a union of the two largest Reformed Churches and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands.

### ESSENTIALS OF THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

In spite of all the differences, which largely result from the differing national, cultural and theological contexts, the threefold stratification of the tradition, which I mentioned before, means that most evangelicals do have certain common traits. They commonly consist of the following essentials.

(a) The unconditional acceptance of *Holy Scripture* as the authoritative Word of God for us.

(b) Personal faith in *Jesus Christ* and his work of salvation and a personal relationship with him by the work of the *Holy Spirit*.

(c) The emphasis on the *missionary task* of the individual believer and of the congregation as a whole.

These three essentials are obviously due to the historical development I sketched before. These three main tenets of the Evangelical Movement clearly emerge from the three-layered tradition. The first essential goes back to the Reformation of the 16th century with its *sola Scriptura*. The second goes back to

Puritanism in Great Britain, to Pietism in Germany and Scandinavia, and to the 'More Precise' Reformation in the Netherlands.

As is to be expected, this threefold theological harmony does not mean uniformity. Again and again one notices different emphases within the common background. And yet, in spite of these differences in ecclesiastical tradition, the common characteristics are so manifest that one evangelical recognizes the other as a fellow-evangelical. When theologians from different European countries and from different ecclesiastical traditions meet each other every two years at the FEET Conference, they have no difficulty at all in accepting each other as fellow evangelicals.

For this reason it is worthwhile to elaborate on these common features.

#### I Holy Scripture as the Word of God

The unconditional acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God is characteristic of all evangelicals and this puts them clearly in line with the 16th century Reformers. The Reformation was a movement 'back to Scripture' and to the gospel proclaimed in it. In the course of the centuries all kinds of ecclesiastical and theological traditions had been added to the Bible, with the result that the gospel of free grace had been obscured.

In his defence of this gospel Luther time and again appealed to Scripture. He refused to be silenced by an appeal to the Church Fathers or to important medieval theologians. When this was demanded of him, he replied: 'Only if you can show me on

the basis of Holy Scripture that I am wrong, I will recant. But if you can't do this, I will adhere to this gospel, even if it may cost me my life.' Calvin, and the other Reformers as well, was a Scriptural theologian too. For him the Bible was the final court of appeal. It is not surprising, therefore, that nearly all Reformed Confessions contain a long chapter or article on Holy Scripture as the inspired and authoritative Word of God.

From its very beginning the Evangelical Movement emphasized this authority of Holy Scripture as the Word of God and its normativity as to both doctrine and the Christian life. As we have already seen, the first article of the basis of the British Evangelical Alliance speaks of: 'the Divine Inspiration, Authority, and Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures'<sup>5</sup>. This does not mean that these people were blind to the humanity or, if you prefer, the human side of the Bible (although perhaps they paid too little attention to it). In the face of the prevailing liberalism of the day their main concern was the sufficiency, the clarity or perspicuity and the normativity or authority of Holy Scripture.

However, more has to be said here. As we will presently see, when we deal with the other main features of evangelical theology, the strong

5. Cf. the second paragraph of the Lausanne Covenant, which deals with the authority and power of the Bible and opens with the statement: 'We affirm the divine inspiration, truthfulness and authority of both Old and New Testament Scriptures in their entirety as the only written Word of God, without error in all that it affirms and the only infallible rule of faith and practice.' J. D. Douglas ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, (1975), p. 3).

points of the Evangelical Movement often reveal their weakness as well. This is quite clear in the case of Holy Scripture.

Making a careful study of evangelical theology, one soon discovers that in spite of the common recognition of the *formal* authority of Scripture, there often are far-reaching differences in the interpretation of Scripture. At this very point it becomes manifest that, indeed, there is no common evangelical theology. What is often lacking is the recognition of the *unity* of Scripture.

This may also be the reason why the bases of evangelical associations often consist of a number of more or less 'loose', disconnected points of doctrine. Within the Evangelical Movement there have been very few, if any, attempts to produce a confession of faith. A typical feature of the ecclesiastical confessions was and is that the truth, proclaimed in Scripture, is seen as an organic whole. One can easily discover this unity in both the confessions of the various churches (such as the Thirty-Nine Articles or the Westminster Confession) and the catechisms (such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Shorter and Larger Catechism of Westminster). Compared with this unity of the various confessions and catechisms evangelical thinking is often rather fragmentary. The closest the movement has come to a confession is perhaps the so-called Lausanne Covenant, which shows that as a world-wide movement the Evangelical Movement is also able to draft a joint and united confessional statement.

Many evangelicals are inclined to

adopt a *biblicistic* approach to the Bible. In particular in eschatology there is a tendency to collect and mix all kinds of statements from very different biblical contexts and to take them literally, which often leads to strange conceptions, such as two Second Comings, two or even three Resurrections from the dead, etc. Fortunately the days are gone where evangelicals judged each other by their acceptance or non-acceptance of the rapture before, during or after the great tribulation.

Another point that has to be mentioned here is that although all Evangelicals share the conviction that the writings of the Old and New Testaments are *inspired by the Holy Spirit*, they are by no means unanimous as to what we must understand by this inspiration.

Evangelical theologians of a former generation were often not far removed from a mechanical conception of inspiration. At times they gave the impression that the Holy Spirit had 'dictated' the contents of Scripture. The theologians of the 'Old Princeton School' (Hodge Sr and Jr, and Warfield) liked to speak of 'verbal' inspiration.<sup>6</sup> I am happy to see that today very few evangelical theologians are willing to go that far.

6. Cf. also Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 9, 11, 20-25

If any answerable style I can obtain  
Of my celestial Patroness, who deigns  
Her nightly visitation unimplored,  
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
Easy my unpremeditated verse. . . .

His nephew Eduard Philips tells us that Milton used to wake up in the morning with lines of poetry fully formed in his head. Blind, he then dictated them.

In his new dogmatics Donald Bloesch emphasizes that Scripture is both the Word of God and the word of men. He appeals to the way Calvin used the concept of 'accommodation' in his doctrine of revelation. God is like a nurse who bows down to the child and chatters with it in a child's limited language. In a similar way the Spirit has given to the writers of the Bible 'a reliable but incomplete knowledge of God's will and purpose'.<sup>7</sup>

We have also noticed that in recent years quite a few evangelical theologians have been willing to make use of some of the methods and results of the so-called historical-critical research of Scripture, while at the same time they refuse to share the often hyper-critical approach to Scripture. Initially there was a strong opposition to this historical-critical approach to Scripture, because it started from presuppositions that were contrary to the self-testimony of Scripture. But it cannot be denied that the advocates of this approach had come upon a real problem.

Another point, related to the foregoing, is the question of whether we should speak of the *inerrancy* of the Bible. Champions of inerrancy usually claim that the Bible is inerrant in all respects, not only in its theological contents but also in all geographical and historical details. Others prefer to speak of the reliability, veracity and truthfulness of the Bible, taking these terms in their original historical sense: the Bible *never fails* to fulfil the promises it offers in the name of God. In the words of Wayne Grudem:

7. Donald G. Bloesch, *Christian Foundations*, part 2, *Holy Scripture*, (1994), p. 121.

'The Bible is as trustworthy and reliable as the God who speaks in it.'<sup>8</sup>

## II Jesus Christ and his Saving Work

The second main emphasis in evangelical theology is on *Jesus Christ and his saving work*. At this point, too, evangelicals stand wholly and intentionally within the tradition of the entire Christian church. They believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who, for us and our salvation, became man (the Nicene Creed) and who through his suffering and death on the Cross reconciled us with God. They insist that we may not give up any of the so-called saving facts: the Virgin Birth, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Ascension, the Session at God's right hand and the Second Coming (the Apostles' Creed). With the Lausanne Covenant they confess that there is only one Redeemer and only one gospel.

This emphasis on the saving work of Christ is linked to a deep awareness of the sinfulness of man. Such texts as Isa. 6:5—'Woe to me, I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . .'; and Luke 5:8—'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man'; and Rom. 7:24—'I am an unspiritual man, sold as a slave to sin', strike a deep chord in evangelicals, because they know these feelings from personal experience. They believe that Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the

law, by becoming a curse in our stead (Gal. 3:13). For the same reason, the idea of substitution is a central tenet of their Christian faith.

All this is not a matter of abstract theoretical knowledge only. It is a matter of the heart, which has been touched by the *Holy Spirit*. Being a nominal member of the church, even attending church services regularly and participating in the sacraments is not enough. Faith has to be a living faith and should be accompanied by personal experience. In other words, there has to be an awareness of the work of the Spirit in one's life. There has to be a knowledge of being born again and of conversion.

When it comes to the 'form' of conversion, there are some differences of opinion among evangelicals (is conversion instantaneous, so that one can mention time and place, or is it more in the nature of a process?), but generally evangelicals do not prescribe a particular method or a particular emotional manifestation. The emphasis is on the *fact* of conversion, not on its particular form.

In all these matters there is a close affinity between present-day evangelicals and the Puritans and the Pietists of the 17th and 18th centuries. They too used to put a strong emphasis on the work of the Spirit. It is he who regenerates and converts. It is he who causes a person to understand and believe the gospel. It is he who teaches and enables us to pray. Prayer itself is more than reciting a set form of prayers. Prayer is pouring out your heart before the heavenly Father. Furthermore, it is the Spirit who sanctifies us and enables us to fight against sin from

8. Wayne A. Grudem, in D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (eds), *Scripture and Truth*, (1983), p. 58.

within and temptation from without. It is the Spirit, too, who guides us in our personal decisions. All these convictions, which were typical of the Puritans and the Pietists, hold good for modern evangelical spirituality.

But there are also some problem areas as regards the work of the Spirit. I believe that evangelicals acknowledge the *sovereignty of God*. As to regeneration, conversion, sanctification, spirituality and guidance, they all admit that we are totally dependent on the Spirit. Yet, at this very same point we also encounter 'tensions' within the evangelical community. To a large extent these tensions date back to the Revival Movements of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In some sections of these movements strong emphasis was put on the human *free will* and its free decision to choose for God. For this reason John Wesley called the magazine he edited 'The Arminian Magazine'. But at this very point there was a deep division between him and other revivalists, such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, who always emphasized God's electing purpose and believed that no person comes to Christ, unless he has been convinced by the Spirit. In the 19th century Charles G. Finney again emphasized the free will of man. It was he, too, who introduced the custom of asking people to come forward and of praying with them, in order to bring them to the right decision. He even believed that in this way conversion can be 'exact-ed' from God.

In our day, too, many evangelicals put so much emphasis on the human

decision that they are almost blind to the work of God's electing love. Many of them are, quite often unintentionally, Arminian rather than Calvinistic. They actually follow the lead of John Wesley, who in his doctrine of grace distinguished two lines: (a) God's grace is *entirely free*, that is, grace comes from God alone. (b) God's grace is *free for all*, that is, all people are invited to accept it. Whether or not they do this, depends entirely on their own decision.

The Reformers had a different approach. They all saw God's *gracious and electing love* behind the human decision (which they did not deny). And this was not an alarming, but a liberating idea for them: the certainty of my salvation does not depend on my prayers, my reading of Scripture, my going to church, my sanctification or my witnessing, but it is anchored in the fact that God holds me in his loving hand. Indeed, that is the reason why I pray and read the Bible, why I go to church and fight against my sins and bear witness to the gospel.

Obviously, we have to keep in mind that the emphasis on personal experience, on regeneration and conversion, and on personal holiness may easily lead to *subjectivism*, personal experience becoming the central and decisive aspect of our faith. Our personal experience can also easily become the hermeneutical key for reading the Bible and the criterion by which we judge others. He or she who does not share our particular experience is only a second-rate Christian.

The emphasis on experience also explains why the *Charismatic Move-*

ment is so influential in evangelical circles. There is a mutual recognition of a shared faith which is the fruit of personal experience. Even when one does not accept the specific charismatic tenets of a Spirit-baptism as a kind of 'second blessing' and evidenced by speaking in tongues, the very fact that the Charismatics (and the Pentecostals as well) appeal to the work of the Spirit is enough to make them acceptable as fellow-believers and fellow-evangelicals. In 1974 they were prominently present at Lausanne and they are also always in attendance at the FEET Conferences.

The emphasis on personal experience may also lead to *individualism*. The idea of the *covenant*, which plays such a prominent part in the Bible (not only in the Old Testament, but in the background also in the New Testament, for instance in the baptism of entire families and in the fact that children are 'holy' in and with the believing partner, (1 Cor. 7:14), hardly plays any part in the thought and life of many evangelicals.

Related to this is the fact that to many of them the congregation is not so much an 'organism', composed of believing families rather than of believing individuals, but more a voluntary association of born-again people, who recognize each other as such and who want to celebrate the communion with God in common worship.

On the same grounds many evangelicals reject infant baptism. Only the person who has deliberately chosen for Christ and has experienced the work of the Spirit in his own life may be baptized.

Evangelicals are undoubtedly right in stressing the necessity of *personal sanctification*. Exactly at this point some of the ideas of John Wesley are still operative. He himself believed in the possibility of 'Christian perfection' as a kind of 'second blessing', although as far as I know he never claimed it for himself. Afterwards similar ideas were active in the so-called Keswick Movement.

Such a strong emphasis on personal sanctification has its drawbacks too. (a) In the first place it can easily lead to an attitude of legalism. Certain 'forms' of sanctification become normative and function as criteria for judging others. Quite often these 'forms' are negative: no drinking, no smoking, not keeping up with the latest fashion, no dancing, etc. There is a double risk here: (1) of using these criteria as a means of finding out whether the other people are true evangelicals and (2) of sifting out the gnat and swallowing the camel (Matt. 23:24). Leland D. Hine, an American evangelical, wrote some twenty-five years ago in the magazine *Eternity* that some evangelicals will never drink even the smallest nip of the weakest wine, but at the same time they may act discriminatingly against a fellow Christian, because he happens to belong to another race.

(b) Too many evangelicals are still heedless of 'structural evils', which abound in our society. They regard the 'free market' system almost as an integral part of the Christian life style. Fortunately much has changed during the last decades. In Lausanne the obligation to engage in social activities was mentioned immediately after the call to witness to the gospel.

### III The Missionary Task of the People of God

This leads me to the third layer in the evangelical tradition: the *missionary calling*. This characteristic dates back to the 18th and 19th century Revival Movements, which initiated the modern Missionary Movement. Most evangelicals see witnessing to Christ as the first task of a believer. How should one who has been saved from the fire of God's righteous wrath not help other people to be saved as well?

Already in the introduction to the Lausanne Covenant we read that we are 'challenged by the unfinished task of evangelization. We believe that the gospel is God's good news for the whole world, and we are determined by his grace to obey Christ's commission to proclaim it to all mankind and to make disciples of all nations.'<sup>9</sup>

I am very happy to note that there is a growing awareness among evangelicals that witness and action belong together. More and more evangelicals realize that there are many social problems in our societies which cry out for a solution and that Christian social activity is a witness by itself. In the English-speaking world the impetus to social action comes mainly from the young 'radical' evangelicals in the USA and in Britain from people such as John Stott. And, of course, in many Third World countries evangelicals play a major role.

9. J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, (1975), p. 3.

### Unanswered Questions

#### The Nature of the Church

Unfortunately, in evangelical thinking there are a few more problem areas we have to face. The first one is the *doctrine of the church*. Evangelicals usually put the whole stress on the *spiritual* unity of all true believers, but often they do this at the expense of the *visible, institutional* church.

Of course, one ought to be a member of the local church or group, but at the same time one experiences the deepest level of spiritual fellowship in meetings with fellow-evangelicals in Bible study groups or larger evangelical conferences. It is quite customary to celebrate the Lord's Supper at such conferences, quite apart from any local congregation. In actual fact one is thinking and acting in terms of the so-called 'believers' church' and is more in line here with the 16th century Anabaptists than with the Reformers of that same century.

The Anabaptists were of the opinion that the Reformers did not go far enough in their reformation of church and society, as appeared clearly from the fact that they retained the ideas of a national church and of infant baptism. The Anabaptists themselves championed the idea of a 'congregation of born-again people', in which there is place only for believers' baptism, on the basis of a personal confession of faith.

This line of thinking recurs in its own particular form in the Baptists, the Quakers, the Brethren, Pentecostal Assemblies, etc. I am happy to note that in recent years many evangelicals begin to see the importance

of the institutional church. They pray not only for a revival of the church, a work of the Spirit himself, but are also willing to engage in the duty of reforming of the church, a task in which we ourselves are always involved.

#### Eschatological Issues

The last problem area I want to mention is the *doctrine of eschatology*. Evangelicals wholeheartedly believe that at the end of history Jesus will come again and inaugurate the fullness of the kingdom of God, which already became manifest in his own words and acts. But there is much disagreement on some features of this doctrine, in particular on the topic of the Millennium. The fundamental questions here are of a hermeneutical nature. This is an added reason why I think that it is of paramount importance for the Evangelical Movement to reach a common hermeneutic.

Another item that will increasingly come to the fore is the question: What will be the *eternal fate* of human beings? In general there are three possibilities. (a) There will be an eternal divorce between believers and unbelievers: at death the former will go to heaven and will afterwards dwell on the new earth; the latter will go to hell, where they will be tormented in all eternity. (b) The second possibility is the idea of universalism: eventually all rational beings, including the demons and Satan himself, will be saved, most likely after a longer or shorter period of probation and purification, which will lead to their conversion and the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.

(c) The third possibility is that of annihilation (sometimes also called the doctrine of 'conditional immortality'). According to this view the believers will go to heaven in order to be eternally with God and the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Revel. 21:23; 22:3), but after the general resurrection of the dead, the unbelievers will be destroyed by God, so that they cease to exist.

Most evangelicals, in line with the tradition of the Early Church, of the Medieval Church, of the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Churches and the Churches of the Reformation, opt for the first possibility as the only scriptural view.<sup>10</sup> Universalism, which was advocated in the Early Church by Origen, in the 16th century by the Socinians and in the 19th century by quite a few liberal theologians, but also by F. D. Maurice, and in our century is quite common among Liberal and Roman Catholic theologians<sup>11</sup>, has never been a real option for evangelicals. In recent years, however, we see that the third option is gaining ground among evangelicals. It is defended by such evangelical stalwarts as John Wenham<sup>12</sup> and John Stott.<sup>13</sup>

10. Cf. for instance, Leon Morris, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (1984), pp. 369-70.

11. Cf. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) and *ibid.*, *God has Many Faces* (1980), and Paul Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions* (1985). See also: John Hick and Paul Knitter ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (1987).

12. John Wenham, *The Enigma of Evil*, (1985), pp. 27ff.

13. John Stott, in David L. Edwards/John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, (1988), pp. 312ff.

I would like to end this short and incomplete survey of evangelical theology with a twofold conclusion.

1. It is definitely possible to speak of an evangelical theology, at least as far as the main tenets of the Christian faith are concerned.

2. There are still many areas where evangelicals disagree. In other words, there is still much to be done by evangelical theologians. They have to

study hard and should make the results of their study available in scholarly publications. I for one would be inclined to give special attention to the doctrine of Scripture and to hermeneutics. The different hermeneutical conceptions used within the Evangelical Movement are the main cause of the theological differences we have noted in this paper.