

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: WHERE *SHOULD* WE BE GOING?

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What is appropriate for a presidential address? Those who have been in this position will recognize how unique the demands of this assignment are. The difficulties are obvious. We sit here with full stomachs after a long and full day of travel and meetings. One more session is still on the agenda. And it is only realistic for me to recognize that our interests are varied. Consequently, I suspect that there are only two fond hopes for this address that you all hold in common: (1) that I will not put you to sleep with a subject of no personal interest to you, and (2) that I will keep the length of my remarks within appropriate limits. This certainly presents me with a challenge, but not with a subject.

When I considered the theme of this thirtieth annual meeting, "Evangelical Theology: Where Are We and Where Are We Going?", I discovered that no one had been assigned to give an overview of where evangelical theology *should* be going. I did not choose my subject; my subject chose me. Presumptuous though it may be of me to address this topic, I come to it with the conviction that we each are prone to be isolated within the specialties of our own discipline, with a consequent loss of direction, perhaps within that discipline itself, and even more likely a loss of direction with reference to matters outside that discipline. We need a sense of direction across the countryside while wending our way through the cities, villages and hamlets. I will give my perception of where evangelical theologians should be going in the years ahead. I will not be so presumptuous, however, as to suggest conclusions that should be reached; we must do our homework first. But I will point to the possibilities and problems which, in my judgment, we either cannot or dare not ignore.

One direction we will find ourselves going, whether we want to or not. You all know what I am referring to: the inerrancy question. Neither side in this discussion can be expected to let the subject go away. One pole will be sharpening and defending the concept but may be in danger of so narrowing inerrancy that it will depart from the Biblical basis and the historical understanding of the concept. The other pole in the discussion can be expected to continue to repudiate the concept altogether or to continue to use the term "inerrancy" but to so qualify it as to evacuate the concept of any significant meaning.

Few if any evangelicals look with relish upon the possible polarizations and divisions that may develop within their ranks if trends known to exist back in the 1950s and 1960s, but only recently publicly identified,¹ continue. But I submit to you that no matter where you stand on this issue there could hardly be one more crucial for the future health and vigor of evangelical theology. Perhaps Lindsell's historical and theological argument can be faulted in certain minor details. But the "slippery-slide" theory (or maybe you prefer to call it the "banana-peel" or "domino" theory) is pretty hard to refute in either its historical or theological ver-

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¹H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

sion. In saying that, I am not arguing that inerrancy is the *essence* of what it means to be evangelical or Christian (as Bernard Ramm accuses some of saying²). But I am saying that historical precedents and epistemological considerations seem to indicate that one's position on inerrancy is a kind of watershed indicating the logical, and perhaps eventual, direction of one's theology. As Kenneth Kantzer has put it, the doctrine of inerrancy is "essential for *consistent* evangelicalism and for a full Protestant orthodoxy."³

Just because the developing discussion of inerrancy is so critical, I appeal for an attitude of candor and openness bathed in familial Christian love. We should not forget that even James Orr, who did not subscribe to inerrancy, was a contributor to *The Fundamentals*⁴ and a valiant defender of orthodoxy. J. Gresham Machen is not remembered as one who evaded critical theological issues. Yet even Machen admitted, "There are many who believe that the Bible is right at the central point, and yet believe that it contains many errors. Such men are not really liberals, but Christians." Machen could say this while also emphatically saying that "the mediating view of the Bible" was not "logically tenable."⁵ We who subscribe to inerrancy should continue to value the contribution to the cause of Christ made by those who have modified their position on inerrancy even while we express concern over those very modifications and departures.

Furthermore, just because we do believe the noninerrantist position of our brethren to be historically, Biblically and logically indefensible, there must continue to be forums where the two sides can continue to discuss the issues. Specifically, inerrantists need to press the issues of logical consistency and epistemology, Scripture's view of itself, Christ's view of and use of Scripture, and the historic view of the Church. In my judgment, noninerrantists have either been in actual error on these matters or else have evaded the key issues.⁶ Is it too much to hope that open confrontation of issues, not people, would elicit serious rethinking among some errantists? Perhaps it would prove to be wishful thinking, but is there not much more to be gained by assuming the integrity and intellectual honesty of those with whom we disagree? It is to be hoped that the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy can successfully follow through on its announced intention of engaging the opposing view in open discussion.

If truly open discussions take place, however, inerrantists should not be so foolish as to assume that they will not be confronted with some rather difficult questions themselves. We may have individually resolved these matters to our own satisfaction, but on them there is no consensus among inerrantists. It is far from evident that there is even a common, univocal meaning ascribed to the word "inerrancy." Among those whose inerrancy credentials are considered to be impeccable, there are differing explanations of the implications of the concept.

²B. Ramm, "Is 'Scripture Alone' the Essence of Christianity?", *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco: Word, 1977) 109-123.

³K. Kantzer, "Evangelicals and the Inerrancy Question," *Evangelical Roots* (ed. K. Kantzer; Nashville: Nelson, 1978) 91.

⁴Orr contributed to vols. 1, 4, 6, 9 of *The Fundamentals* (Chicago: Testimony Publishing, 1910-1913).

⁵J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) 75.

⁶As examples I cite J. Rogers, ed., *Biblical Authority*, and the special 1976 issue of Fuller Theological Seminary's *Theology, News and Notes*: "The Authority of Scripture at Fuller."

Unresolved differences of hermeneutical approach becloud the unity of our subscription to inerrancy. Let me illustrate. Is there any responsible inerrantist who would not say that it is the intended meaning of the author's words that is without error? Lindsell, for instance, admits to such in his discussions of the missing thousand and the mustard seed.⁷ But once that legitimate and necessary principle is admitted, we might as well candidly acknowledge the presence of a whole host of other problems. Is there a single concurrent divine-human authorial intention in Scripture, or the possibility of double authorial intention—one human (and possibly errant) and the other divine (and hence inerrant)? If recognition of authorial intention is necessary to the proper perception of inerrancy, how round can a round number be and still be inerrant? If approximations are admissible, how approximate can an approximation be and still be inerrant? If phenomenological language or the language of appearances is admissible, what is the dividing line between errancy and inerrancy? If apparent errors in recorded speeches in Scripture can be dismissed as inerrant records of errant speeches, how may the reader know which speeches, or parts of speeches, come to him with absolute binding authority? If it is admitted that the Bible is a piece of literature containing a variety of figurative language (at least simile, metaphor and hyperbole) and literary genre (at least poetry, discourse, historical narrative, parable, epistle and apocalyptic), then on the basis of authorial intention can an inerrantist admit the possibility of pseudonymous literature in Scripture? If not, why not? Or can a NT scholar who subscribes to inerrancy legitimately argue that the evangelists created a distinctively Christian type of literary genre called "gospel," somewhat akin to Jewish midrash, in which historical accuracy, in the author's intention, took second place to the author's exposition of the Christian message, with the result that there are *actual* discrepancies and contradictions among the gospels in reportorial details? Can it be argued, then, that fictional elements, mixed with historical facts, are consistent with the inerrancy of the author's intention because the fictional elements serve the author's theological purpose? Using the assumptions and methodology of redaction criticism, evangelical NT scholars are raising these questions. The broader community of evangelical scholarship would do well to address these very questions posthaste.

There is another interesting twist to inerrancy and authorial intention. Inerrantists have legitimate interest in harmonization and elimination of apparent discrepancies in Scripture. On the really tough problems we usually resort to one of two approaches. We can propose a solution which theoretically or technically is possible, but which is something less than a natural or obvious meaning we would assign the passage were it not for the existence of an apparently discrepant parallel. The other approach is to suspend judgment and speak of it as an apparent discrepancy incapable of natural resolution at this time. I prefer the latter approach. However, proponents of both alternatives have to be ready to defend themselves against the charge that neither takes the words of Scripture as seriously as the word "inerrancy" suggests. Why? Because, it is charged, neither will accept the obvious conclusion based on the most natural meaning of the passages: An actual discrepancy exists. It can be argued that both contorted harmonization and suspension of judgment deny the clarity of Scripture, which is to deny the view of inspiration they are intended to uphold. In fact, with such rea-

⁷H. Lindsell, *Battle*, 167-169.

soning errancy is being defended in the name of inerrancy and verbal inspiration!

Just what does inerrancy of the author's intended meaning allow for? We are driven from inerrancy into hermeneutics. But hermeneutics can also become a guise to evacuate the inerrancy concept of any real meaning. The pages of our Society's *Journal* testify to the fact that we inerrantists still have homework to do.⁸

William Wells concludes his review of James Barr's recent book, *Fundamentalism*, with this challenge:

If inerrancy is worth defending, then it is worth articulating more carefully. Barr's questions and barbs make it apparent that we do not yet have a satisfactory formulation of the doctrine. Second, the evangelical community has in fact been accommodating itself to critical scholarship. The question is: How far should that process go? Until now, conservative theologians and Bible scholars have worked on this problem, but they have rarely worked together closely. It is time they did.⁹

I happen to believe inerrancy is worth defending, and hence worth articulating more carefully. It is also worth working toward a consensus on the hard problems.

I read with skepticism James Boice's statement in a letter to invited participants to the summit meeting of the ICBI. He wrote that after the summit "the church and the world will know exactly what we mean by the term 'Biblical Inerrancy,' and that we are in agreement concerning its definition."¹⁰ Although Boice expressed a legitimate goal, his predicted fulfillment seems premature. The "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" resulting from that meeting is a remarkably balanced and comprehensive document, especially considering the theological diversity of the participants and the time limitations within which they operated. Even so, the papers and discussions leading up to the document clearly showed that inerrantists themselves disagree on the definition and implications of inerrancy, the apologetics of inerrancy, the determination of authorial intention, the question of single or dual intention, the use of the historical-critical method, the uses of literary genre, and the cultural conditioning of Scripture. A comprehensive consensus has not yet emerged. As a body evangelical theologians, apologetists and Bible scholars committed to inerrancy need to squarely face these questions.

The Evangelical Theological Society has this statement as its doctrinal basis: "The Bible alone, and Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." Allegations have occasionally appeared to

⁸Consider these articles from the last ten years of *BETS* and *JETS*: D. P. Fuller, "Benjamin B. Warfield's View of Faith and History," 11 (1968) 75-83; A. F. Holmes, "Ordinary Language Analysis and Theological Method," 11 (1968) 131-138; N. L. Geisler, "Theological Method and Inerrancy: A Reply to Professor Holmes," 11 (1968) 139-146; A. F. Holmes, "A Reply to N. L. Geisler," 11 (1968) 194-195; G. H. Clark, "Guest Editorial," 12 (1969) 69-71; D. Fuller and C. Pinnock, "On Revelation and Biblical Authority," 16 (1973) 67-72; R. J. Coleman, "Reconsidering 'Limited Inerrancy,'" 17 (1974) 207-214; J. B. Payne, "Partial Omniscience: Observations on Limited Inerrancy," 18 (1975) 37-40; V. S. Poythress, "Problems for Limited Inerrancy," 18 (1975) 93-103; G. R. Osborne, "Redaction Criticism and the Great Commission: A Case Study Toward a Biblical Understanding of Inerrancy," 19 (1976) 75-85; P. B. Payne, "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Human Author's Intention," 20 (1977) 243-252; G. H. Clark, "Beegle on the Bible: A Review Article," 20 (1977) 265-286.

⁹W. W. Wells, "Blasting Bible Believers," *Christianity Today* 22/17 (June 2, 1978) 34.

¹⁰Letter dated June 22, 1978.

the effect that some in our membership continue to sign this statement with mental reservations.¹¹ That such is the case is not all that evident to me. But it may be true that the alleged mental reservations are in fact differing understandings of what "inerrancy" means or perhaps even uncertainty with respect to its precise meaning.

The Evangelical Theological Society should be a forum where those with a commitment to inerrancy can come to grips with the problems of definition and hermeneutics. We (and our critics) should remember that our statement was never intended as a creed adequately summarizing what it means to be Christian or evangelical. The statement on Scripture is exactly what our constitution says it is. It is the doctrinal basis on which we have agreed to do our scholarly work, theological and Biblical. Part of that work in the days immediately ahead should be to challenge and confront the errantist position. But in all candor we should admit that another part of our work is to clarify and sharpen our own position, attempting to come to a common understanding of what inerrancy means and how it functions within the hermeneutical problems surrounding our use and appropriation of Scripture for our day in history.

Important as it is, though, the discussion of inerrancy should not be allowed to become the preoccupation of evangelical theology.¹² Theology is more than prolegomena. Our theological task is to move beyond and build on that theological foundation. If we do not do this, in a few years, we will discover that our work has only been an eddy in the ongoing stream of theological discussion in our time. We may have won a battle (over inerrancy) but have lost the war (the construction of a Biblically-based evangelical theology addressing the issues of our time). I make a special point of this, because in the past we have been prone to this kind of narrow focus. It is important that a building have a foundation; but of what value is a foundation with no adequate structure atop it?

Just what are these areas of theology that we need to address constructively in the immediate future? Without suggesting that there are no other candidates, I submit to you that the area most in need of serious theological discussion in the near future will be ecclesiology. This in turn can be divided into two large subject areas: the nature of the Church (what we might call ecclesiology proper) and the mission of the Church (an aspect of missiology). The theologian and Biblical scholar who does not tune his/her ear to the discussion of these related issues simply will not be where the action is; and, worse yet, the Church of Jesus Christ worldwide will be the poorer for that failure.

Keep in mind, please, that this is an essay proposing an agenda for evangelical theology, identifying the crucial questions with which evangelical theologians should be wrestling. As with inerrancy, I will not attempt to resolve the issues. It is sufficient for my purposes to identify them and indicate how they impinge on the theological task. First, we turn to ecclesiology proper.

One of the most interesting concerns surfacing among some evangelicals is the search for Church continuity and connection with tradition. Even from the earli-

¹¹Such allegations often take the form of vague, oral rumor. A few are in print and more specific. Cf. H. Lindsell, *Battle*, 128-131; R. Quebedeaux, *The Worldly Evangelicals* (New York: Harper, 1978) 18, 22-23, 163-164; J. Montgomery, "Whither Biblical Inerrancy?", *Christianity Today* 21/20 (July 29, 1977) 40; also "Relief from Payne," *Christianity Today* 22/8 (January 27, 1978) 39-40.

¹²Cf. K. Kantzer, "Evangelicals," 88-100.

est years of the Reformation, the reformers asked these same kinds of questions. Consider for instance Luther's lengthy discussions of the marks of the true Church and its continuity as the Church of Christ through history.¹³ Protestants indeed do need to ask such questions.

But recent years have seen a renewed interest in the question in American evangelical circles. It has been marked by the turn of some well-known evangelical personalities to the Episcopal Church and the issuance of the Chicago Call.¹⁴ What seems to have influenced some in this direction are the emphases on continuity and tradition, liturgy and worship, and the sacraments and the historic creeds of early Christendom. That such an interest should emerge in American evangelicalism at this time is not surprising. Except for those denominations with a particular national origin, North American evangelicals have characteristically had little sense of history or of their connection with the Christian past. Independence has been so idealized as to make it appear that a church can exist without a context in or connection with the Christian past. Faith and worship have been so highly individualized in the North American evangelical experience that the corporate aspects of these seem all but lost in many instances. It is no wonder, then, that some evangelicals are searching for roots, even if it means grafting themselves into the episcopal trunk.¹⁵ They apparently feel that there they find a continuity of faith, practice, worship, community and ecclesiastical authority.

This mood can hardly be ignored. For one thing it is a response to a very real deficiency in North American evangelical Christianity. It will not be enough to ignore or criticize the crypto-episcopatism of the Chicago Call and some of its signers, though there will undoubtedly be some of us who will want to do that. We must address those felt needs to which the Chicago Call and the turn to episcopatism are a response.

Another of the critical ecclesiological issues of our day is Church unity. It confronts Christians worldwide. It concerns inclusivists and exclusivists, ecumenists and separatists. Each position from its own perspective wrestles with the problems. Is the oneness for which Jesus prayed and about which Paul wrote exclusively spiritual, or is it to also have structural and visible manifestations? And if there are to be the latter, what should be the shape of that structure? How inclusive should the theological basis be? Would subscription to the Apostles' Creed be sufficient? Or should it be a distinctly Protestant evangelical unity? If so, how is evangelical to be defined? Or should the basis of unity be experiential (such as a born-again or a charismatic experience) rather than creedal-theological? And once these issues are resolved, how is such unity to be effected within the diversity reflected within Christendom-Protestantism-evangelicalism?

Or perhaps the preoccupation with problems of structural unity is misplaced. Is the Biblical model of the Church organic rather than institutional? If Howard

¹³These may be found throughout vols. 39, 40, 41 of *Luther's Works* (American edition), but note especially 40. 7-44.

¹⁴M. A. Noll, "Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail," *Eternity* (March 1978) 15-19, 40, 42.

¹⁵Cf. R. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

Snyder is right, the current preoccupation with super-churches, with super-pastors, with super-plants, with super-bus fleets is misplaced.¹⁶ But if he is right, it seems to me that denominational and transdenominational structures of all types must also be radically revalued.

As long as we are discussing the problems of Church structure, the whole problem of parachurch organizations needs to be theologically addressed. Are they in fact arms of the Church, or have some of them in effect become "church" for their staffs and constituency? To whom are they accountable theologically, financially, and in terms of methodology, priorities and goals? The contemporary proliferation of organizations with multimillion-dollar budgets and staffs numbering in the hundreds or thousands, accountable to no one but an ill-defined constituency, is certainly as much a theological question as it is a practical question.

Intertwined with several of these issues is the nature of the Christian ministry. Is it to be authoritarian or serving? Singular or plural? Ordained or lay? Male alone or male and female? Indeed, what roles of leadership and service may women Scripturally assume in the cause of Christ? Has the traditional subjection of women to male leadership preserved the divine order for home, Church, and society, or has it in fact perpetuated sinful male dominance and deprived the Church of the feminine perspective and the full use of fifty per cent of its human resources? Is the traditional position a Biblical absolute or culturally conditioned? Are evangelical feminists self-assertive females with no regard for Biblical authority and order, or are they prophetic voices calling on the Church to incarnate the full implications of oneness and equality in Christ? Are they selfishly demanding a piece of the ecclesiastical pie or simply insisting that they be allowed to use fully the gifts sovereignly given them? Let us not be so naive as to think these questions will go away by ignoring them or by dismissing them with jokes. Furthermore, we must all face these questions aware of our own culturally conditioned rationalizations, submitting them to the full authority of what Scripture teaches as the ideal that transcends culture.

Most of the matters I have mentioned so far are most directly related to the daily life and function of the Church in the world. One remaining item is less so, but it is no less important for one's theological understanding of the Church and its place within redemptive history. What is the Church, and what is its relationship to OT Israel and its covenants? Many interrelated concepts are at issue in this discussion: Israel, Israel of God, spiritual Israel, seed of Abraham, OT Church, people of God, body of Christ, old covenant, new covenant, and kingdom. Nearly the whole of social eschatology is also bound up with this aspect of ecclesiology.

In the past our discussions have usually polarized around two standards: covenant theology and dispensationalism. I do not call for a renewal of the old polemics or for the ill feeling that all too frequently passed back and forth in that discussion. But I wonder if the time has not come for a reopening of the discussion that would go beyond that of our predecessors. I am no starry-eyed optimist who would ask that the opposing views put aside deeply-held convictions in the interests of finding the lowest common denominator. The great gulf between the two,

¹⁶H. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), and *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977).

however, may not be so great as it once was. I cannot speak for the covenant theologians, and I confess that I am not conversant with their recent literature on this subject. But what I have picked up in casual conversation with some of you suggests to me that many of you have made some significant modifications in your so-called covenant theology and that you may even be less doctrinaire than you once were. But equally significant is the fact that dispensational theology is not now what it once was or perceived to be. Even a comparison of the old *Scotfield Reference Bible* with the *New Scotfield Reference Bible* gives some evidence of shifting. Or one might compare older dispensationalism with Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* or his recently published *Study Bible*. Other younger dispensational theologians have made even more significant changes in their views on the kingdom concept, the new covenant, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 13, the people of God, and so on. I wonder whether we are mutually aware of these shifts. May there now exist the possibility of a new level of discussion? Does a focus for renewed discussion exist in Walter Kaiser's proposal of a promise theology?¹⁷ As Kaiser has so often insisted, one's hermeneutical theory and practice are hinge issues.¹⁸ Maybe this is where a new level of ecclesiological-eschatological engagement should occur. I urge evangelical theologians to explore this route.

As we stand back and look at the panorama of Church-related issues that need to be seriously addressed by theologians, we are struck by their diversity and complexity. In the past most of them have been marked by deadlocks and in some cases ugly animosities. But these very issues continue to press in upon us, some with renewed urgency. We might prefer not to address them anew because of pessimism as to the outcome. Or could it be that even the suggestion of renewed discussion also suggests the possibility of flexibility and modification—something theologians are not noted for? But the facts are that a great deal of literature has recently appeared on some of these subjects. Unfortunately, much of it is historically and theologically uninformed, or at least ill-informed. The Church of Jesus Christ is in a critical period just in terms of its perception of itself. It needs the services of its theologians. Decisions and directions are influenced and/or made by popular authors, charismatic personalities, congregational votes, general assemblies, commissions, congresses, continuation committees, parachurch organizational hierarchies, and so on. Evangelical theologians need to get their ecclesiological act together and on the road. Only then can we expect to have a meaningful impact on the Church as Church at the end of the twentieth century.

The Church and its mission, or missiology, has emerged as an even more critical area of theological discussion in the last few years. Missiologists are addressing issues that many feel make the inerrancy question pale into relative insignificance by way of comparison. And yet with only a few notable individual exceptions North American evangelical theologians seem to be unaware of and uncon-

¹⁷W. C. Kaiser, "The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems," *JETS* 20 (1977) 97-111. This paper, read at the spring 1976 meeting of the mid-western section of ETS, was the focus of prepared responses by an amillennialist, a covenant premillennialist and a dispensationalist. The results of that discussion tend to support the point I am making here, but there must be a purposeful effort to continue such exploratory dialogue.

¹⁸W. C. Kaiser, "The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10," *JETS* 21 (1978) 3-18.

cerned about the missiological discussion and literature. Few of us have become involved in the discussion in meaningful ways.

Shortly after I was elected president of ETS, I had a brief discussion with a highly placed individual in the World Evangelical Fellowship about the relationship of ETS to the WEF's Theological Commission (they list us as an association with whom fraternal contact has been established). I wanted to explore the possibility of more meaningful involvement of ETS members in the work of the Theological Commission. Frankly, I was given the cold shoulder. Why? I was told that North American evangelical theologians tend to exercise a theological imperialism over their peers around the world and that as a group we were largely unaware of the missiological issues. That indictment may not be fully justified, but there is enough truth to it that it should give us cause for concern. If we are to avoid a theological provincialism we must tune in to missiological literature and discussions. Frankly, many of us will need to assume the rule of student before we can become full participants.¹⁹

Some of the missiological issues are better known to us than others. The theological issues arising from the church growth movement and principles are generally well known. Is the concept of socially homogeneous churches consistent with the nature of the Church as developed in Pauline literature? Are people movements, or the newer phrase "multi-individual conversions," consistent with the personal nature of repentance, faith and new birth? Is the concept of winnable peoples consistent with the universal character of the great commission? Do the quantitative means of measuring church growth tend to minimize discipleship and qualitative growth? Does the church growth movement have a well-defined theological basis, or is it fundamentally a success-oriented set of principles primarily indebted to the findings of the behavioral sciences? Church growth theoreticians have sharpened some of their terminology, modified some of their concepts, and corrected some mistaken outside perceptions of their principles as they have interacted with those not identified with the movement. But more of this sort of interaction is needed, and theologians need to be more active participants in the discussion.

The missiological issue that we most urgently need to come to grips with is contextualization. I wonder if we really recognize that all theology represents a contextualization, even our own theology? We will speak of Latin American liberation theology, black theology, or feminist theology; but without the slightest second thought we will assume that our own theology is simply theology, undoubtedly in its purest form. Do we recognize that the versions of evangelical theology held to by most people in this room are in fact North American, white, and male and that they reflect and/or address those values and concerns?

Contextualization is concerned with the communication of the substance of divine revelation into the forms and structures of the recipients' culture in such a way that the integrity of the gospel and Christianity are not compromised, but also in such a way that the gospel and the Christian way can be fully internalized

¹⁹The literature is enormous, although largely ignored by evangelical Biblical scholars and theologians. One could begin with G. W. Peters, "Current Theological Issues in World Missions," *BSac* 135 (1978) 153-164, and *Theology and Mission* (D. J. Hesselgrave, ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978). Journals such as *Missiology*, *International Review of Mission*, *Occasional Bulletin* and *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* quickly plunge one into the issues. Also see *The Willowbank Report—Gospel and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978).

by the person in that culture. Contextualization aims to address the person in his actual situation.

The gospel and Christianity are never known to exist outside of a cultural context, not even within Scripture itself. So we are first faced with the hermeneutical problem of discerning essential substance from nonessential form within Scripture itself. What is normative and what is merely descriptive within Scripture? Our present norms of Biblical hermeneutics do not adequately deal with this problem. Next, the one communicating to those of another culture must be sensitive to the fact that his own expression and practice of the faith is a contextualized one. And finally, that essential substance must be contextualized in the culture of the recipient.

Some elements of cultures, however, need to be judged by divine revelation. By what standard and methodology do we discern which aspects of a culture need to be adapted to and which to be judged? How can the gospel and theology be related to a culture without becoming relativized in the process? How do we avoid accommodation (in a bad sense) to a culture in the interests of communication to a culture? In short, how can contextualization avoid becoming syncretism? The one taking the gospel to another culture is not the only one who must be sensitive to the danger of accommodation and syncretism in the process of contextualization. We must examine our own contextualized theologies for evidence of accommodation and syncretism to and with prevailing non-Christian values and concepts.

We must also recognize that contextualization properly involves not only readily identifiable cultural forms and values but also the mentality, concepts and ways of thinking peculiar to a particular culture. Samuel Rowen has stated this point well by asking:

If creeds and confessions are our contextualized expressions of the gospel, then what is their proper place in the continuing process of contextualization? In what ways do we legitimately build upon what the Spirit of God has done through the church in the past?²⁰

Must an Asian Christian express his understanding of the incarnation in Chalcedonian form?

The more one becomes aware of the peculiar problems faced in contextualization the more one is impressed with the complex and critical nature of the issues. We must adequately prepare our students to participate in the process, and we ourselves must begin to participate in and contribute to that process in meaningful ways.

This then is where I believe evangelical theology should be going in the years ahead of us. But I have one final observation. I have argued that the challenge to evangelical theology is to make new advances in the definition and implications of inerrancy, the nature of the Church and its ministry, and missiological issues loaded with theological implications. You may have noticed that one theme is a common ingredient in all three: hermeneutics. Many, perhaps most, of the unresolved problems relating to the definition and implications of inerrancy can be boiled down to one word: hermeneutics. The same can be said of many of the

²⁰S. Rowen, "Response," in *Theology and Mission*, 114.

issues I have identified in ecclesiology: It has long been recognized that hermeneutics is at the heart of the debate between covenant and dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology.²¹ And what is contextualization except cross-cultural hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is the unfinished item on our agenda of theological prolegomena. It must be seriously and comprehensively addressed by all evangelical theologians and Biblical scholars in the immediate future. Without a hermeneutical consensus, any hope for a consensus in theology and ethics is mere wishful thinking. We evangelicals rightly make a great deal of the normative nature of the Biblical text. Our views must be judged in the light of Scripture. But our agreement on this point has real significance only to the extent that we "correctly handle the word of truth."

²¹The literature is replete with examples of this recognition. I cite only one recent example: R. Clouse, ed., with contributions by G. Ladd, H. Hoyt, L. Boettner and A. Hoekema, *The Meaning of the Millennium* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 18-29, 41-44, 55, 65-69, 104-111, 134-138, 172-176.