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THE EMERGING DIVIDE IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

GERALD R. MCDERMOTT*

Imagine the scene. Ancient Jerusalem is at war. Its army is fighting far away. Behind the city walls, its old men, women, and children nervously await word on what happened in battle. Their lives and future are at stake. Suddenly, a cry rings out from the sentries watching from the look-out points on top of the wall. "Your God reigns!" A rider approaching the wall has signaled victory. The whole city explodes in celebration. The word "evangelical" comes from this Hebrew idea of announcing the good news that God now reigns with power and grace.

This essay will argue that while evangelical theology has come into its own in recent decades, it is also deeply divided. One branch contributes to the development of historic orthodoxy, while another follows a trail blazed by Protestant liberals. The future will probably see further distance between these two kinds of theology, with one perhaps becoming "evangelical" in name only. I will begin the essay by outlining recent successes and the ways in which evangelical theologians since the 1970s have understood their own distinctives. Part II will uncover the divisions in today's evangelical theology, and Part III will highlight the doctrines that evangelical theology is reexamining. I will conclude with projections for the future (Part IV).

I. SUCCESS

Evangelical theology has come of age. This is not surprising, given the explosion of the movement in recent decades, not only in England and America but especially the Global South. While evangelicals were confused with fundamentalists by most of the academy until recently (and still are by many), the rise to academic prominence of evangelical historians (such as Mark Noll, George Marsden, Harry Stout, and Nathan Hatch), Scripture scholars (the likes of N. T. Wright and Richard Bauckham), ethicists (led by Richard Hays), and theologians (including Kevin Vanhoozer, Miroslav Volf, and Alister McGrath) has demonstrated the growing maturity of this movement's intellectual leaders.

Evangelical theology has not reached the self-confidence of Roman-Catholic and post-liberal Protestant theology, and some of its strongest thinkers borrow from the two latter schools. But more of them are learning from their own tradition (for example, from Jonathan Edwards's mammoth philosophico-theological project and John Wesley's capacious if diffuse theology), and sounding distinctive voices in the world of Christian theology. The result has been a new profusion of evangelical theologies. Already, at the end of the 1990s, Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten was saying that "the initiative in the writing of dogmatics has been seized

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by evangelical theologians in America … [M]ost mainline Protestant and progressive Catholic theology has landed in the graveyard of dogmatics, which is that mode of thinking George Lindbeck calls 'experiential expressivism.' Individuals and groups vent their own religious experience and call it theology."[1] Evangelicals, on the other hand, mostly still believe theology is reflection on what comes from outside their experience as the Word of God. Perhaps for that reason they have more to say—talking not just about themselves but about a transcendent God. In any event, they have been remarkably productive. In the first decade of this new century, the presses have groaned under the weight of books by evangelicals in systematic theology, historical theology, ethics, hermeneutics, biblical theology, philosophical theology, theology of culture, public theology, theology of science, and a host of other theological sub-disciplines.

But this is not the evangelical theology your father knew in the 1970s. Back then, evangelical theology had little but contempt for the charismatic movement because of what seemed to be its loosey-goosey attitudes toward doctrine and serious thinking. Now some of the best-known evangelical theologians—Clark Pinnock, James K. A. Smith, and Amos Yong, for example—are charismatics and Pentecostals, and few theologians hold tightly to the old theory that charismatic gifts ceased after the apostolic age. In the 1970s there was a sizable gulf between dispensational and Reformed theology, with neither side talking to the other. Now that respected scholars such as Darrell Bock and Craig Blaising have developed "progressive" dispensationalism, that gap has narrowed.

The questions have also changed. In 1976, which Newsweek magazine dubbed "The Year of the Evangelical," evangelical theologians debated inerrancy of the Bible, the timing and existence of a millennium, Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy, and the threat posed by abortion-on-demand. They agreed that liberal theology was bankrupt, tradition suspect, and universalism (the view that everyone will eventually be saved) impossible. Most evangelical writers were convinced that Roman Catholicism was a religion of works, and apologetics a useful way of showing that Christian faith is reasonable. Other religions were barely on the theological radar—except as proofs that only Christians would be saved.

Almost a half-century later, the assumptions and questions have shifted dramatically. Evangelical theology has accepted the collapse of classical foundationalism—the notion that there are, or should be, logical or rational grounds for belief. Although most still see a clear line separating Roman Catholic from evangelical theological method, and some still regard Catholicism as sub-Christian, many have learned from the Catholic theological tradition and agree with the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification (1999) that the Catholic tradition does not teach salvation by works. Basic theological differences between Calvinists and Arminians remain, but today's debates swirl around the role of women in the home and church, what it means to care for creation, whether justification was too narrowly defined by the Reformation, whether God knows our future choices, if non-

[1] Carl E. Braaten, "A Harvest of Evangelical Theology," *First Things* 61 (March 1996) 45–48.

Christians can be saved and learn religious truth through their traditions, if we need to change our thinking about homosexuality, and whether the damned are destroyed or eventually saved. All assume the Bible is final authority for Christians, but some are saying we ought to learn about the Bible from (mostly Catholic) tradition.[2] Theologians on both sides of the debate over tradition are divided over the basic task of theology—whether it is to reapply existing evangelical and orthodox tradition to new issues, or to rethink and possibly change the tradition as theologians gain "new light." All evangelical thinkers recognize that revelation in Scripture contains propositions—ideas that can be expressed in words—as well as non-propositional elements such as stories and images which also reveal. Nearly all would agree that the Bible tells one grand story. But while some think revelation is God both acting *and* speaking so that doctrine and experience can never be separated, others say revelation is about God's acts rather than words and that the essence of faith is experience not doctrine.[3]

In Part II I will discuss these divisions in greater detail. But before I do so, let me establish a baseline by explaining what evangelical theologians have until recently agreed on—both the nature of evangelical faith itself and how it differs from that with which it is often confused, fundamentalism. It is also important to see where evangelical theology differs from other sorts of Protestant theology.

Evangelical theologians trace the word "evangelical" back to the Greek noun *euangelion*, which means "glad tidings," "good news," or "gospel," the last of which goes back to an Old English word for "God talk." Three times the NT says that someone who proclaims the gospel of Christ dying for our sins is an *euangelistes* ("evangelist").[4] There are signs of what could be called an evangelical spirit throughout church history, from the early church and its fathers, through Augustine, Ambrose, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and Pascal, to the Reformation precursors Wycliffe, Hus, and Savonarola. But the word was first used of Catholic writers who early in the sixteenth century tried to revert to more biblical beliefs and practices than were current in the late medieval church. (Ironically for evangelicals who have a long history of polemics against Catholicism, it was 16th-century Jesuits who first gave the modern meaning to the word for what has been regarded as quintessentially evangelical—"missions.") Then at the Reformation the name was given to Lutherans who focused on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith and sought to renew the church based on what they found in Scripture.

The more recent roots of today's movement lie in the trans-Atlantic revivals of the 1730s and 1740s, led by Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley and George White-

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[2] Kevin Vanhoozer, Christopher Hall, and Daniel Treier are among the leaders of this evangelical return to a "theological interpretation of Scripture."

[3] Of course this begs the question of whether this "faith" is the existential act of believing or the content of what is believed. But while the orthodox tradition has regarded the two as interconnected and generally has not wanted to prioritize experience over doctrine or *vice versa*, the group I call "Meliorists" tends to separate the two and favor one over the other.

[4] Acts 21:8; Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:5.

field, who highlighted the authority of Scripture, the work of Christ in salvation, and the new birth. This movement was shaped by the Puritan legacy of preaching and conversion, but stressed more emphatically the sense of assurance of salvation. It was also molded in part by Pietism, which emphasized warmth of feeling, sometimes at the expense of doctrine, and by Enlightenment modes of thinking, which appealed to the authority of John Locke and used his method of testing opinions by experience.

These Enlightenment influences were strengthened during the high tide of common sense philosophy in the nineteenth century, which promised the unerring value of intuition. While Edwards had insisted that fallen reason can never know the majesty of God, Charles Hodge claimed we can be certain "of those truths … given in the constitution of our nature." In the mid-twentieth century Carl Henry tended to put more emphasis on intellectual principles one can derive from Scripture than on the biblical narratives, a pattern which Yale theologian Hans Frei identified as characteristic of the Enlightenment mentality.

Forerunners to today's evangelical theology originally emerged as self-conscious reactions against fundamentalism, which began shortly after 1910 as a series of pamphlets making reasoned arguments against Protestant liberalism but then degenerated into a reactionary "oppositionalism" which lost its link with the historic creeds of the church and tended to ignore the social demands of the gospel. As one scholar described it, it was "too otherworldly, anti-intellectual, legalistic, moralistic, and anti-ecumenical."[5]

The deliberate use of the term "evangelical" in this century dates to the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, which was a careful attempt to distinguish evangelicalism from fundamentalism. In contrast to the fundamentalist separation from modern culture, the "new evangelical" theology (led by E. J. Carnell, Harold Ockenga, and Carl Henry, and inspired by Billy Graham) was committed to engaging with culture in an attempt to transform it through the gospel. In the seventy years since, evangelical theology has matured at the same time that many evangelicals have concentrated on peripheral matters (such as the "rapture" and other questionable eschatological details) and equated the logical conclusions of dogma with dogma itself (particular formulations of biblical inerrancy, double predestination, the second blessing, the millennium).

Although Karl Barth was not an evangelical in the American or British sense of the word, his definition of the word summarizes what evangelical theologians have agreed on until recently: "*Evangelical* means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the 16th-century Reformation by a direct return to Holy Scripture."[6] Some important evangelical thinkers such as N. T. Wright and Thomas Oden are now questioning the primacy of the Reformation, as we shall see. But

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[5] Martin E. Marty, "What is Fundamentalism? Theological Perspectives," in *Fundamentalism as an Ecumenical Challenge* (ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann; Concilium 1992/1993; London: SCM, 1992) 3.

[6] Quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 1: *God, Authority, and Salvation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 7.

nearly all would agree with the following six evangelical "fundamental convictions," first proposed by Alister McGrath: (1) the majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as Savior of sinful humanity; (2) the lordship of the Holy Spirit, who is necessary for the application of the presence and work of Christ; (3) the supreme authority of Scripture, recognizing that the language of Scripture is culturally conditioned but that through it God has nevertheless conveyed the eternal, unconditioned Word; Scripture is to be interpreted with the help of reason and the best tools of scholarship, with attention to differing genres; (4) the need for personal conversion: this is not necessarily an emotional experience but at least involves personal repentance and trust in the person and work of Christ, not simply intellectual adherence to doctrine; (5) commitment to evangelism and missions; (6) the importance of religious community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth.[7]

Every one of the above six distinctives is shared by most other Christians. What makes this list evangelical, however, is the degree of emphasis which evangelical theology places on the six marks, and the forms which they take. For example, all Christians say evangelism is important at one level or another, but not all regard it with the urgency evangelicals often show. Some regard social service as evangelism, and others do not consider conversion to faith in Christ to be necessary. When Billy Graham conducted his first crusade in New York City, some Protestant mainline leaders ridiculed his efforts—not only because he did not emphasize structural social reform, but also because theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr regarded personal evangelism as theologically wrong-headed. Some of those same churches today speak of personal evangelism as essential to the growth of the church in the world, but they send out fewer missionaries and do less to train their members for the task of evangelism than their evangelical counterparts typically do. While all Christians speak of the need to turn from the world to Christ, evangelicals have placed more emphasis on conversion because of the Puritan and Pietist legacies from which Edwards, Whitefield, and Wesley learned.

Evangelical theology is often regarded, both by the media and much of the academy, as fundamentalism put into writing. But they are really two quite different ways of thinking, which can be identified in eight ways. This doesn't mean that all the members of First Baptist will be fundamentalists, or that everyone at the local Evangelical Free church thinks like an evangelical rather than a fundamentalist. These are what sociologists call ideal types, which means that each is a clear set of beliefs that contrasts strongly with its opposite but that the differences are seen more clearly by looking at large groups over time rather than at one person or congregation at a given time. But these differences have emerged in theology and practice, in the following ways.

1. *Interpretation of Scripture*. Fundamentalists tend to read Scripture more literalistically, while evangelical theologians look more carefully at genre and literary and

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[7] Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 53–87.

historical context.[8] Another way of saying this is that fundamentalists tend to assume that the meaning of Scripture is obvious from a single reading, while evangelicals want to talk about layers of meaning and might appeal to the medieval fourfold sense of scripture. For example, more fundamentalists will understand the first three chapters of Genesis to contain, among other things, scientific statements about beginnings, while evangelicals will focus more on the theological character of those stories—that the author/editor was more interested in showing that the earth has a Creator, for example, than precisely how the earth was created.

2. *Culture*. Fundamentalists question the value of human culture that is not created by Christians or related to the Bible, whereas evangelicals see God's "common grace" working in and through all human culture. For evangelicals, Mozart may not have been an orthodox Christian and quite possibly was a moral failure as a human being, but his music is a priceless gift of God. Culture is tainted by sin, as are all other human productions, but it nonetheless can reflect God's glory.

3. *Social action*. There was a time when fundamentalists considered efforts to help the poor to be a sign of liberal theology, because proponents of the social gospel during the modernist controversy of the 1920s were theological liberals.[9] Until recently many fundamentalists limited their view of Christian social action to struggles for religious freedom and against abortion. Evangelicals have been more vocal in their declarations that the gospel also calls us to fight racism, sexism and poverty—and even more recently, degradation of the environment.[10]

4. *Separatism*. For many decades in the last century fundamentalists preached that Christians should separate themselves from liberal Christians (which sometimes meant evangelicals) and even from conservatives who fellowshipped with liberals. This is why some fundamentalists refused to support Billy Graham—Graham asked for help from mainline Protestant and Catholic churches, and sent his converts back to these churches for further nurture. Evangelical theology puts more emphasis on engagement with culture while aiming to transform it, and working with other Christians toward common religious and social goals.

5. *Dialogue with liberals*. Fundamentalists have tended in the past to believe that liberal Christians (those who doubted Jesus's bodily resurrection, the essential sinfulness of humanity, and the importance of blood atonement) were Christian in name only, that there was nothing to learn from them, and there was no use trying

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[8] Confusion often abounds, however, when people talk about literalism and fundamentalists. It is not true that fundamentalists interpret every word of the Bible in literal fashion. For example, I do not know any fundamentalists who think God is literally a rock (Ps 18:2) or Jesus a door (John 10:7). And even the most liberal Christians take the Bible literally when it asserts that God is one (Deut 6:4).

[9] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 85–93. See also Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakenings of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 118, 193.

[10] I should also say, however, that many fundamentalist churches (and parachurch organizations such as the Salvation Army) have provided spiritual and material uplift for the poor for well over a century. Not to mention the black churches, which have typically been fundamentalist and evangelical in theology.

to talk to them once they refused to accept the fundamentalist version of the gospel. The evangelical approach has been to talk with those of more liberal persuasions in an effort to persuade and perhaps even learn. John Stott and Clark Pinnock both engaged in book-length dialogues with liberal theologians.

6. *The ethos of Christian faith.* Although most fundamentalists preach salvation by grace, they also tend to focus so much on rules and restrictions (do's and don'ts) that their church members could get the impression that the heart of Christianity is a set of laws governing outward behavior. There is a similar danger in evangelical churches, but evangelical theology focuses more on the person and work of Christ, and personal engagement with that person and work, as the heart of the Christian faith.

7. *Fissiparousness.* Many evangelical groups have fractured and then broken again over what seems to later generations to have been minor issues. But the tendency seems worse among fundamentalists, for whom differences of doctrine, often on rather minor issues, are considered important enough to warrant starting a new congregation or even denomination. Because evangelical theology makes more of the distinction between essentials and non-essentials, evangelicals are more willing to remain in mainline Protestant churches and in evangelical churches whose members disagree on non-essentials. Nevertheless, evangelicals are more fissiparous than classical Protestants who cling more closely to their confessional traditions. Fundamentalists, in contrast, are not team players by temperament and think of themselves as individuals in a vast invisible church.

8. *Support for Israel.* Fundamentalists tend to see the modern state of Israel as a direct fulfillment of biblical prophecies, and say God's blessing of America is contingent on its support for Israel. Evangelicals generally see the creation of Israel in 1948 as at least an indirect fulfillment of prophecy, lacking the complete fulfillment because there has not been the spiritual renewal which the prophets predicted. Evangelicals run the gamut in support for and opposition to Israeli policies. But while many other Christians see Israel as just another nation-state, and the new evangelical left has joined mainline critics questioning the legitimacy of modern Israel, most fundamentalists and evangelicals still think today's Israel has continuing theological significance.

If the evangelical and fundamentalist ways of thinking differ on both content and practice, evangelical theology differs from classical Protestant orthodoxy more on method. Evangelicalism tends to use the principle of *sola scriptura* more radically than the Protestant traditions out of which it grew. That is, when it subscribes to the doctrines of the great creeds of the church (although some evangelicals and their theologians don't, crying "No creed but the Bible!"), they do so not because the creeds teach the doctrines but because they believe the doctrines have biblical support. Evangelical theologians are not always averse to reading the great fathers and mothers of the church (such as Macrina, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Avila) or to learn from the historic confessions, but they typically insist that they do so with critical care. They want to reserve the right to use Scripture as a trump card over tradition when they see conflict between the two. Self-designated "post-conservatives" such as Roger Olson, Clark Pinnock, and the late Stanley Grenz

have been the most vocal about the need to be open to further light breaking out from the Word that might compel a reshaping of doctrine or new doctrine entirely, such as Openness of God theology described below.

Evangelical theologians say they reject liberalism's faith in human experience as a final norm for truth and morality. Against the homogenizing tendency of liberal theology, which would postulate an underlying religiosity common to all faiths, evangelical theology emphasizes the particularity of Christian revelation and the uniqueness of Christian spirituality. While liberals place a premium on personal autonomy and appeal to internal norms (conscience and religious experience), evangelicals have usually stressed human responsibility to God, who has given us external norms in Jesus Christ and Scripture.

Some evangelical theologians have learned from the more recent "research program" called postliberalism, which has been inspired by Karl Barth, Hans Frei, and George Lindbeck. This method of theology highlights the primacy of narrative as an interpretive category for Scripture, asserts the hermeneutical primacy of the world created by the biblical narratives over the world of human experience, and claims the primacy of language over experience (the words we have been given about God shape our experience more than our experience shapes our words about God). Some evangelical theologians cheer postliberals' emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christianity, Scripture as the supreme source of ideas and values, the centrality of Jesus Christ, and its stress on Christian community.

But the problem with postliberalism for other evangelical theologians is that the former tends to reduce truth to a matter of internal consistency. Alister McGrath has argued that postliberals have a difficult time answering the question, Why be a Christian and not a Buddhist? Postliberals are also unclear on the nature of revelation. They deny that the Bible is an objective revelation from God, and say instead that the Bible can contain the Word when the Holy Spirit so moves. As a result, they do not clearly determine whether the gospel stories are fictional or real. McGrath and other evangelical theologians put more emphasis on the objective nature of the biblical revelation. With postliberals they emphasize the necessity of the Spirit's illumination to give true understanding of the Person featured in the biblical story, but they assert that the Spirit inspired the writing of the texts in such a way that makes the Bible the Word of God even if no one ever receives it as such. The Gospels are not merely stories that help us "perform" a Christian life by portraying a Christ who may or may not have been Jesus of Nazareth, but show us the true Jesus who also was the Christ.[11] This debate over postliberalism has played a key role in the evangelical divide between what I shall call Traditionists and Meliorists.

[11] McGrath, *Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 157–61.

II. DIVISIONS

Evangelicals have always been divided over John Calvin, but now they are even more so. Today's movement emerged from a Puritan-Reformed tradition indebted to Calvin, and a Wesleyan/Pietist tradition reacting against Calvin and all his works. Wesley agreed with Calvin that salvation is by grace, but for Wesley this meant a "free will supernaturally restored to every man" rather than only to the elect. Wesley denied Calvin's unconditional election, preferring the view that God saves based on the condition of faith which he sees from "all eternity at one view."[12] Wesley also rejected Calvin's "perseverance of the saints"—his assurance that true believers will never lose their salvation. The conflict between Arminians and Reformed continues today, with, for example, Ben Witherington arguing in *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (2005) against irresistible grace, the idea that Christians are in bondage to sin, and individual election as something that takes place before a person's own choices. He also faults dispensationalism for its rapture theology (arguing it has no basis in the Bible) and his own Wesleyan tradition for an overly optimistic view of free will.[13] But the fault line between these two evangelical theological traditions is familiar—dividing Arminian synergism (we are saved and sanctified by our wills cooperating with God's will) from Reformed monergism (God's will determines ours but without making us robots).

Now this traditional division has morphed into a larger theological split that has turned former foes into allies. I choose to call the new opposing camps the Meliorists and the Traditionists. The former think the tradition of historic orthodoxy needs improvement and sometimes basic change. The latter believe it might sometimes be wise to adjust our approaches to the tradition, but that generally it is more important to learn from than to change it. The new division is loosely connected to the old, for most of the Meliorists are also Arminian, and most of the Traditionists are Reformed. But there are some curious realignments, such as the Paleo-conservatives (led by Thomas Oden, who is Wesleyan) who are among the Traditionists. Oden, a 1970s convert from trendy liberalism to what he and others call the Great Tradition (of early church, medieval, and Reformation theology), famously said his goal is to eschew anything new, for everything worth saying has already been said.

This new division has developed from attacks by post-conservatives on what they call "conservative" evangelical theology. "Conservatives" are allegedly still stuck in Enlightenment foundationalism, which seeks certainty through self-evident truths and sensory experience. It supposedly sees the Bible as a collection of propositions that can be arranged into a rational system. Doctrine is said to be the essence of Christianity for the "conservatives," who build a rigid orthodoxy on a foundation of culture-bound beliefs because they do not realize the historical situ-

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[12] John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," in *John Wesley* (ed. Albert C. Outler; New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) 447, 433.

[13] Ben Witherington, The *Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

atedness of the Bible. In *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (2007), Olson suggests this brand of evangelical theology is fundamentalist in spirit because it hunts down heretics and chases them out of their "small tent." He calls his brand of evangelical theology the "big tent."[14]

Olson divides "conservatives" into two camps, "Biblicists" (a derogatory term in theological circles) and "Paleo-orthodox" (another unseemly moniker suggesting musty museums). The Biblicists (who according to Olson include Carl Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, J. I. Packer, Wayne Grudem, Norman Geisler, and D. A. Carson) see revelation as primarily propositional and doctrines as facts. But most importantly, Olson claims, they also regard doctrine as the "essence" of Christian faith.[15]

The Paleo-orthodox include Baptist D. H. Williams, the Reformed author-pastor John Armstrong, Anglicans Robert Webber and David Neff, William Abraham at Perkins School of Theology, and of course the Methodist Oden. For this sub-division of "conservatives," the ancient ecumenical consensus is the governing authority that serves as an interpretive lens through which Christians are to interpret Scripture. The critical and constructive task of theology is conducted in light of what the ecumenical church already decided about crucial doctrinal matters.[16]

Meliorists such as Olson think the basic problem with Traditionists (both the Biblicists and Paleo-orthodox) is that they give too much weight to tradition. They believe Biblicists pay too much attention to evangelical tradition, and Paleo-orthodox thinkers are too subservient to the pre-modern consensus. Olson asserts that the Great Tradition has been wrong in the past, which just goes to show that all tradition is "always … in need of correction and reform." Evangelicals should reject any appeal to "what has always been believed by Christians generally" because tradition by nature protects vested interests. The creeds are simply "man-made statements." They all need to be re-examined for possible "revisioning of doctrine" based on a fresh reading of Scripture. Nothing is sacrosanct, everything is on the table. Only the Bible is finally authoritative. But even that is too often mistaken for revelation itself, which in reality consists more of the "acts of God" in history than the words of the Bible. Meliorists tend to reject the idea that the actual words of the Bible are inspired, and often prefer to speak of "dynamic inspiration," in which the biblical authors but not their words are inspired.[17]

Here is where things get puzzling. While Olson, for example, seems to prefer this newer approach to inspiration, he also sometimes says the Bible's words are inspired and is typically orthodox in his conclusions. Pinnock urges "steadfast loyalty to the doctrines of classical Christianity" and advises evangelicals to "drop our

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[14] Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming: The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 34.

[15] Ibid. 20.

[16] Ibid. 21–22.

[17] Ibid. 192, 17, 190, 88, 46; Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 102–4.

prejudice against tradition."[18] Olson says we should think of the Great Tradition as a "Third Testament" which should be ignored "only with fear and trembling," and warns that "whatever overthrows the Great Tradition is likely to be heretical." He insists that "no postconservative evangelical wishes to discard tradition" and that all their theologians "respect" the consensus of the early church fathers and the Protestant Reformers.[19]

It is not clear if other Meliorists have the same respect for the Great Tradition. What is clear, however, is that some are challenging that Tradition in significant ways. Theologians like Steve Chalke, Joel Green, and Mark Baker are challenging penal substitutionary atonement (PSA). Chalke says it is rooted in pagan practice and so needs not just "reworking but … renunciation."[20] Green and Baker assert that most popular and scholarly understandings of PSA portray a God with "vindictive character who finds it much easier to punish than to forgive." They deny that the Bible teaches that God's wrath must be appeased or "that God had to punish Jesus in order for God to be able to forgive and be in relationship with God's people."[21]

Other evangelical theologians are reluctant to speak of damnation and give fresh support for universalism (for example, Gregory MacDonald a.k.a Robin Parry). Parry's *The Evangelical Universalist* (2006) argues that "all can, and ultimately will, be saved."[22] Brian McLaren, a post-conservative guru of "emerging" churches, does not want to identify his position on precisely the point at which moral orthodoxy is under siege today—gay unions. In a book he co-authored with Tony Cam-

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[18] Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology From an Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 119; Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 233.

[19] Olson, *Mosaic* 37, 43; Olson, *Reformed and Reforming* 121.

[20] Steve Chalke, "The Redemption of the Cross," in Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 42.

[21] Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (2d ed.; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011) 174, 188. Of course, the Great Tradition never taught that God punished Jesus in abstraction, but as a substitute for us because Jesus was willingly taking the penalty in our place. Green and Baker rightly show that there are other models of the atonement apart from which penal substitution is inadequate. But to suggest, as they do, that this model is itself inadequately supported by Scripture is odd. The entire OT sacrificial system, culminating in the Day of Atonement, is built on the idea of a sin-bearing substitute. And in the OT, to bear sin is to undergo its penalty. A key section of Isaiah 53, so important to the NT, asserts that the suffering servant suffers the penalty of others' sins. It is not only vicarious but penal suffering: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6). The NT is full of the penal substitutionary motif. This is true even for Paul, who according to Green and Baker does not teach what the traditional model has taught. Yet Paul says Christ redeemed us from the curse we deserve for our sins; he bore the penalty rather than us (Gal 3:13). He went on to say that God made him to be sin who had no sin (2 Cor 5:21). Jeremias said of this and related passages that their sacrificial imagery express "the fact that Jesus died without sin in substitution for our sins." Mark says that Christ was a ransom for us (Mark 10:45). Green and Baker are right to score the notion that Christ was a third party between the Father and us. But the best proponents of this model have emphasized that, while the cross was indeed satisfaction of God's justice and propitiation to the Father, it was God in Christ who suffered for us, so that the Judge was also the innocent victim, both inflicting and enduring penal suffering. Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus and the Message of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 78.

[22] Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2006).

polo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (2003), Campolo dismisses OT strictures against homosexual acts by saying they are part of the purity code we now call "Kosher rules," and suggests that Paul "was not condemning homosexuality per se" but simply pederasty and heterosexuals who "choose homosexual behavior as a new, kinky sexual thrill." He says Christian tradition condemned gay eroticism, but then "if we yielded to church tradition on *all* points, women would not be allowed to teach Sunday school or serve as missionaries."[23] Gregory Boyd and Clark Pinnock, the most prolific proponents of Openness of God theology, argue that God does not know what we will decide in the future because if he did, our choices could not be free. In the abstract, God could have chosen to have absolute foreknowledge, but he has decided to limit himself in this way so that our choices would not be hindered.[24]

These new proposals may not be the result of Meliorist method per se. Heterodoxy and heresy often arise less by way of novel method and more because of cultural pressure on specific beliefs. Yet because of these new challenges to historic orthodox consensus, evangelical theologians will no doubt want to examine four Meliorist approaches to doctrine, experience, and Scripture. These evangelical challengers seem to have less of Olson's "fear and trembling" about revising the Tradition, and might be tempted to use these new approaches to further distance themselves from historic orthodoxy. The first thing to observe is that despite Meliorists' respect for the Great Tradition, they treat it in practice with a certain ambivalence. All of it, they insist, is "man-made"; it "always" needs correction and reform. It always gets a vote, but never a veto.[25] Never? Not even the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds? Or the Chalcedonian consensus? To say that all of the Great Tradition is man-made is to deny what the Great Tradition itself has claimed—that important chapters such as the development of the Trinitarian doctrines were inspired by the Spirit.

Second, Meliorists exalt experience at the expense of cognitive understanding (doctrine). Olson says that the essence of authentic faith is a distinctive spirituality "rather than" correct doctrine. Orthopraxy is "prior to" orthodoxy, the main purpose of revelation is transformation "rather than" information, and doctrine is "secondary" to evangelical experience.[26] Leading Meliorist thinkers speak of experience as "confirming" belief rather than supplying it, but this exaltation of experience *over* doctrine may open the door for Meliorist disciples to look to experience as a source of doctrine, thus travelling the experiential expressivist route to liberal Protestantism.

Third, we have seen a new hesitation among Meliorists to support plenary inspiration—the view that the words of Scripture are inspired. Olson reports on post-conservatives who see "the words of Scripture as more the human authors'

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[23] Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 182, 185.

[24] See, e.g., Clark Pinnock et al, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

[25] Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming* 63.

[26] Ibid. 28, 62, 87, 88.

than the Holy Spirit's," and new acceptance of Bernard Ramm's Barthian view that the Bible itself is not the Word of God but is a culturally conditioned "witness" to the Word of God.[27] This is critical because of Meliorist insistence on the final authority of Scripture over tradition. If we can overrule tradition because of Scripture, but the words of Scripture are neither the Word of God nor inspired, then how do we decide which concepts "in, with and under" the words are the Word? And who decides? If the biblical authors were culturally conditioned, and all of the Great Tradition is culturally conditioned, what prevents the evangelical theologian from being just another culture-bound interpreter of spiritual experience?

These last questions point to the fourth problem: lack of authority. The Great Tradition is respected but never has veto power. Scripture is said to be authoritative, but its words are not inspired. Since the Word is hidden among phenomena clouded by ancient cultures, only those with knowledge of those cultures can have authority: charismatic Meliorist scholars and writers. But even they disagree with one another, so we are left in a muddled mess.

The combination of these four elements, along with the new departures from orthodox understandings by some evangelical theologians, raises questions. For example, will evangelicals who feel embarrassed by the Tradition's moral theology use methods endorsed by otherwise-orthodox Meliorists to strike out for more liberal waters? It would not be difficult. For if the words of Scripture are culture-bound but not inspired, then one could reason that the particulars of Levitical or Pauline sexual admonitions must give way to the true Word behind the words—love and non-judgmentalism. It does not matter that this new pitting of one set of biblical passages against another also violates the biblical hermeneutic of the Great Tradition, for the Tradition (to most Meliorists) is culture-bound and demands revision, especially when confronted by the experience of committed love and so-called new knowledge. The result is to follow precisely the path of mainline Protestantism as it continued to proclaim the authority of Scripture and respect for tradition while rejecting the Tradition at the point where culture was at war with the words of Scripture.

Not all those called "postconservatives" endorse these progressive principles. Olson claims as a fellow "postconservative" the redoubtable Kevin Vanhoozer, who stands with Alister McGrath as among the most respected evangelical theologians. It is not clear, however, that this moniker fits very well. Vanhoozer may be called "postconservative" because he is post-foundationalist and rejects the view that revelation is *purely* or *primarily* propositional. But he differs with Meliorists on the critical relation between doctrine and experience, and shows a way forward.

Vanhoozer objects to the Meliorist bifurcation between doctrine and experience, decrying the "new ugly ditch" dug between them. Lessing's original "ugly ditch" separated the particular facts of history from supposedly universal dictates of reason, but now (says Vanhoozer) Meliorists create a false dichotomy between doctrine and experience. As George Lindbeck has argued, our religious experience is

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[27] Olson, *Mosaic of Christian Belief* 102; idem, *Reformed and Always Reforming* 107–10.

created in large part by the "doctrines" that show us how to interpret reality, so we cannot say doctrine is distinct from or subordinate to experience.[28]

Although Vanhoozer does not aim at Meliorists in particular, he has suggested in his magisterial *Drama of Doctrine* (2005) that views of doctrine like theirs are one-dimensional, emphasizing the cognitive dimension of doctrine at the expense of the "phronetic" (imparting sound judgment). Christian doctrine, Vanhoozer insists, is not only *scientia* (knowledge) but also *sapientia* (wisdom). It gives us not simply understanding of God but also a way of being in the world.

Vanhoozer also has a different view of how the Bible works as authoritative Word. For most Meliorists, the Bible's authority is primarily functional. God speaks through it when he chooses, and only at those times can we say the Spirit speaks through it with authority. But for Vanhoozer, Scripture has ontological authority. God of course *uses* the words of Scripture to speak to us, but the canon itself is a divine act speaking to the world. The Spirit is active not only on those occasions when particular parts of the Bible are illuminated for us, but was also active in the formation of the words of the canon.

Not all "postconservatives," then, are Meliorists. Vanhoozer is merely a "methodological" postconservative, which means he reformulates traditional doctrines without rejecting them. He is a Traditionist who rejects the notion that we are free to jettison doctrine if it no longer fits our reading of the Bible.

John Franke, who some say is the theologian of the "emerging" churches, stands somewhere between the two camps. He sides with Grenz in finding the "essence of Christianity" in Christian experience, and speaks of creeds and confessions as merely "human reflection" that must be perpetually reexamined and reformulated. But at the same time he urges evangelicals to see that "Scripture and tradition must function together as coinherent aspects of the ongoing ministry of the Spirit."[29] While his proposal that the Spirit speaks through culture risks constructing what H. Richard Niebuhr called a "Christ of culture," his "coinherence" of Spirit and tradition affirms what evangelicals too rarely consider—that the Great Tradition might not be simply man-made.

It turns out then, at the end of the day, that what finally divides evangelical theologians today is their attitude toward tradition and Scripture. Meliorists say the historic church's understanding of Scripture should be scrutinized warily. Some of them profess respect for the Great Tradition, but because of their slippery approach to biblical inspiration and subordination of doctrine to experience, their relation to that Tradition is tenuous. Because the meaning of the Word is found not in the words of the Bible but in the theology of the Meliorist interpreter, *sola scrip-*

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[28] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984); for Vanhoozer in this and the next two paragraphs, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Hermeneutics," in Gerald R. McDermott, *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 35–52; and idem, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

[29] John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 160.

tura can become—despite the best intentions of its leading thinkers—*sola theologia*, with the charismatic theologian the final authority. Traditionists, on the other hand, also affirm *sola scriptura*, but sometimes in a manner that is really *prima scriptura*—Scripture is primary, but the great Tradition is the authoritative guide to its interpretation. Because they see doctrine and experience not above or below but inextricably bound up in one another, they allow the Great Tradition a veto. They yield far more often to that authority. They are ready, as Meliorists are not, to say that not only the words of Scripture but also significant segments of the unfolding of the Great Tradition were guided by the Spirit.

III. FLASHPOINTS

The new fissure between Traditionists and Meliorists is the most basic, but not the only, change in evangelical theology since the 1970s. In this next section I will review other important developments. We will see that most are related to this basic divide, even if not all have been generated by it.

One of the most remarkable changes since the 1970s has been evangelical theological approach to science in general and evolution in particular. While most evangelicals in the pews remain skeptical of neo-Darwinism, evangelical theologians have quietly started to embrace it. Nancey Murphy and Howard Van Til led the way in the 1980s, and now Loren Wilkinson and Alister McGrath are suggesting evangelicals take a longer view. McGrath, who has an Oxford D.Phil. in molecular biology, argues that opposition to evolution is neither essential nor typical of evangelicalism. In the first fifty years of Darwinism, he points out, evangelical theologians such as B. B. Warfield and James Orr were theistic evolutionists, conceding the possibility that God might have created through the mechanism of natural selection. McGrath cites Wesley's teaching that Scripture is not a science text but a disclosure of God's nature and intentions.[30] This new theological openness to Darwin has received fresh support from Wheaton College's OT scholar John H. Walton. In *The Lost World of Genesis One* (2009), Walton argues that the seven days of Genesis refer not to the creation of the material universe but to the inauguration of the cosmos as a functioning temple where God takes up residence. Nothing in the Hebrew text, says Walton, rules out the possibility that God created the cosmos over billions of years through an evolutionary process.[31]

Most of the other important changes in evangelical theology reflect simmering tensions between Meliorists and Traditionists. At the heart of this looming divide is the question of how to interpret the Bible. As we have seen, Meliorists champion individual interpretation and reject a propositional view of Scripture. The Bible, they say, is the story (principally) of God's acts, and it is through this story that we experience God. But Vanhoozer, whose overall approach is Traditionist, transcends the dichotomy between propositions and experience by saying the Bible is itself God's mighty act. God uses propositions in the biblical story, but for more

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[30] Alister McGrath, "Science," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 434–48.

[31] John Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009).

than mere information. He presents himself and relates to people through the proposition-laden story, so that they can then experience the triune God.[32]

McGrath also proposes that evangelical arguments over the millennium, charismatic gifts, and the nature of baptism and communion illustrate evangelical theology's dirty little secret: it has always used tradition (its own or the greater church's) to understand the Bible. Many evangelicals have insisted they should submit to "no creed but the Bible" (which Thomas Albert Howard nicely calls *nuda scriptura*), and that the best evangelical theology has never regarded creeds and traditions as anything but flawed "man-made" theories. (Meliorists agree that the Bible can never be interpreted apart from *some* tradition, but they also avow that all tradition is simply man-made.) McGrath replies that Luther and Calvin, whom most evangelicals regard as theological mentors, were self-consciously guided by the Great Tradition, especially Augustine, Ambrose, and Chrysostom. He adds that the recent dispute over the New Perspective on Paul shows that many evangelicals—especially those who tend to denigrate tradition—ironically prefer the Reformation tradition on justification to new evidence coming from the NT itself. The debate is over whether Paul's "Judaizing" opponents taught salvation by works (and what was meant by "works"), and whether justification is limited to God's legal verdict of acquittal to the believer.[33] N. T. Wright, an evangelical leader of the New Perspective, argues that Luther was wrong to think the Judaizers were Pelagians (teaching that works save). He and his New Perspective colleagues also assert that for Paul justification involves not only acquittal (forensic imputation) but also participation in Christ's holiness.[34] It may not be coincidental that most of Wright's opponents, foremost of whom is Minneapolis pastor John Piper, are also suspicious of theological tradition—except that of the Reformers.

This debate over the role of tradition has affected new evangelical work on the Fall, Christology and the meaning of the gospel. Henri Blocher rejects the view that the story of the Fall is merely a parable describing the nature of sin. He argues that evangelicals must take seriously the tradition's assertion of historicity in the story. Genesis 3 may not be a historical account precisely, but it is an account of a historical fall. To strip the story of historicity—that is, to deny that our forbears made a real choice—would suggest that sin is necessary and God was responsible for it.[35]

John Stackhouse and others have been reconsidering evangelical Christology with an ear to the history of Christian reflection on Jesus. Paul Helm is now suggesting, as have others in the tradition, that Christ in his pre-existence was also incarnate in some sense. Terrence Tiessen, Scot McKnight, and Hans Boersma have taken up Irenaeus's theory of recapitulation (Christ's "re-doing") in which Christ divinizes members of his body by becoming their new head, replacing Adam. Stackhouse uses the kenotic tradition (Christ emptied himself of some of his divine

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[32] See Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Hermeneutics."

[33] McGrath, "Faith and Tradition," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 81–98.

[34] See especially N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

[35] Henri A. Blocher, "Sin," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 129–45.

prerogatives during his incarnation) to suggest modifications in philosophical understandings of divine immutability (God does not change) and impassibility (God does not suffer). The incarnation suggests there is change in the life of God and that at least one of the three Persons suffers. In recent decades some feminists—and some evangelicals—have characterized satisfaction theories of the atonement as "divine child abuse," but Stackhouse reminds evangelicals that the doctrine of the Trinity shows us that "it is *God* as Son who hangs on the Cross, as God looks on as Father and Spirit in the added suffering of grief over the Beloved."[36]

Scot McKnight, a biblical theologian who has helped keep some in the "emerging" church movement from dismissing the Great Tradition, teaches them that the ancient creeds are a kind of "gospelling." He warns that the gospel is not only truthful but transforming, concerned with justification and (social) justice, and in the first century was an implicit protest to empire. He faults evangelical understandings of the gospel that focus largely on conversion and restrict justification to forensic imputation, as is sometimes the case at "seeker-sensitive" churches, for producing Lone Ranger Christians and superficial theology.[37]

Evangelical understanding of conversion itself has undergone a "sea change," according to Gordon Smith. Because recent evangelical theologians are severing their ties with revivalism, they have come to view conversion as a complex process rather than a point in time. They present it no longer as a result of technique or formula (which was the impression given in parts of the revival tradition) but as an encounter with the Risen Christ—not simply with principles or laws (as in Campus Crusade's "Four Spiritual Laws"). Smith has helped evangelicals recall that conversion takes place and develops within community, and that its direction is "missional"—to reach the world. Dallas Willard has spearheaded a new focus on discipleship, rejecting the "Christians are not perfect just forgiven" slogan as truncated and defeatist.[38]

Simon Chan and John Witvliet have been leading a similar change in evangelical attitudes toward worship and spiritual theology, encouraging evangelicals to mine the Great Tradition for its liturgical riches—not to mention its emphases on catechesis and sacraments. Witvliet observes that evangelicals have tended toward a Zwinglian "real absence" view of the Lord's Supper, due more to anti-Catholicism and the Enlightenment than exegesis.[39]

The Achilles Heel perhaps of evangelicalism is its ecclesiology. Its "ecclesial atomism" (Ephraim Radner) has produced more splits than unions from the eighteenth century to this day. Here, too, is where the tension between Traditionists and Meliorists is particularly acute. Some Calvinist evangelicals talk about a Federal Vision in which the worldwide church of Jesus Christ is an objective spiritual reality.

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[36] John G. Stackhouse, "Jesus Christ," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 146–58.

[37] Scot McKnight, "The Gospel," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 195–208.

[38] Gordon T. Smith, "Conversion and Redemption," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 209–21.

[39] Simon Chan, "Spiritual Practices," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 247–61; and John D. Witvliet, "Worship," in ibid. 310–24.

But the history of evangelicalism has been dominated by the view of the church as a free-will association of like-minded believers. This view resists the sense of the Great Tradition that the church is living body spanning place and time, to which all believers are connected whether they choose or not. Radner thinks the only hope is "common martyrdom" in which the persecuted church sees one another across ecclesial lines to recognize the objective and material true Church of Christ.[40]

These debates on church, conversion, Christology and tradition reveal the hidden tensions between Meliorists and Traditionists, but most evangelicals are barely aware of these differences. Yet most *are* familiar with the rival visions behind the debates over sexuality, gender, and eschatology. When some evangelical theologians such as emerging church guru McLaren want to avoid talking about homosexuality, Robert Gagnon argues that avoidance suggests either that sexuality is irrelevant to discipleship or that the Bible is wrong—unless one tries to say the Bible can support homosexual practice, which Gagnon says is exegetically impossible.[41] Besides, two thousand years of church tradition have read the Bible on sex and marriage in a uniform way (when it comes to gay practice and partnerships). Meliorists might argue, however, that tradition does not matter, and that new evidence from science compels us to privilege the Bible's larger story of God's love over culture-bound particular texts.

The debate over gender roles between hierarchical complementarians (John Piper and Wayne Grudem) and egalitarians (Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, John Stackhouse, Elaine Storkey) is less clear. Neither position is aligned straightforwardly with either Meliorists or Traditionists. All involved profess commitment to the authority of Scripture. It will be interesting to see if the hierarchicalists choose to use the Great Tradition for its insistence that sexual difference is theologically significant, and if the egalitarians find a way to recognize the principle of hierarchy (impossible to avoid in the Trinity and biblical concepts of headship) while affirming biblical openness to females in leadership. Since most of the global evangelical world is complementarian, egalitarian theologians will continue to have an uphill battle.[42]

The unfolding discussion of eschatology will show these differences more starkly. A new brand is emerging that reminds evangelicals of the imaginative (not literal) nature of eschatological language in Scripture. Promoters of this brand believe the new earth will be a redemption not replacement of this world, and the final judgment will have less to do with vengeance than certification of appropriateness for entry into eternity. Some advocate annihilationism (the destruction of the wicked), an idea that has appeared in the larger tradition before. More dramatically, as we have seen above, others are proposing universal restoration (the salvation of all). Proponents such as Trevor Hart are sensitive to the fact that ever since

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[40] Ephraim Radner, "Church and Sacraments," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 279–95.

[41] Robert A. J. Gagnon, "Sexuality," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 449–64.

[42] For a recent egalitarian account, see Cherith Fee Nordling, "Gender," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 497–512.

the condemnation of Origenism in 553 the universal church has always taught two distinct destinies for human beings.[43] Others show no such caution.

IV. FUTURES

Some years ago, evangelical historian Nathan Hatch said "there is no such thing as evangelicalism."[44] By that he probably meant that evangelicalism and its attendant theologies constitute a many-headed monster that regularly transforms itself into new shapes. But historic evangelicalism does have a recognizable character, as I suggested at the beginning of this chapter. As William Abraham has quipped, "It would be a mistake … to dismiss evangelicalism as a useless category for understanding Christianity; without it we would have to invent a functional equivalent immediately." It represents a network of Christians "bound together by a loose but identifiable cluster of convictions and practices that have been and continue to be a potent religious force."[45]

But what will be its future shape? And what of evangelical theology? The recent explosion of evangelicalism in the Global South means that future evangelical theology, which is already beginning to come from Asia and Africa and Latin America, will give more attention to the reality of spiritual powers in history and manifestations of the supernatural such as dreams, visions, healing and direct messages from the Spirit. Because of the tendency of majority-world Christians to take the OT more seriously, evangelical theology will have more of a Jewish flavor and be less inclined to spiritualize prophetic promises of land and kingdom. It will be far less ready to sever the connection between moral and dogmatic theology, as Northern theologies have done. Therefore future evangelical theology will be less tempted to relax traditional understandings of the meaning of sex and marriage. But it will also deal with new issues, says Mark Noll, such as the destiny of ancestors and what it means for families and large groups to convert en masse.[46]

Present divisions between Meliorists and Traditionists will widen along two tracks—theological method and the nature of Scripture. On method, the issue is not the historic evangelical appeal to *sola scriptura* per se. Commitment to this principle has spawned repeated divisions from the first evangelical awakenings in the eighteenth century. The lesson evangelicals should have learned is that *sola scriptura* is necessary but not sufficient for maintaining theological orthodoxy. Only a "single-source" view of tradition in which hermeneutical authority is given to the mutual interplay of Scripture and orthodox community—the method that the church practiced for most of Christian history—can protect evangelical theology from

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[43] Trevor Hart, "Eschatology," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 262–78.

[44] Nathan Hatch, "Response to Carl F. H. Henry," in Kenneth Kantzer and Carl Henry, eds., *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 97.

[45] William J. Abraham, "Church and Churches: Ecumenism," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 303.

[46] Mark Noll, "What Is 'Evangelical,'" in William J. Abraham, "Church and Churches: Ecumenism," in McDermott, *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* 19–34.

going the way of all flesh, to liberal Protestantism.[47] Meliorists claim Traditionists elevate tradition above Scripture. Traditionists say they want to submit their individual interpretations of Scripture to those of the wider and longer orthodox church and think through their reformulations by thinking *with* the Great Tradition.

Meliorists overreacted to evangelical excesses in the inerrancy debates of the 1970s. In understandable distaste for rationalistic, ahistorical, and unliterary readings in the "Battle for the Bible," Meliorists separated revelation from the biblical text, and located a so-called Christian essence in religious experience fundamentally removed from words and concepts. Far better is Vanhoozer's response to errancy among the inerrantists. He is not afraid to use the word "inerrant" but talks about different biblical genres and ancient literary conventions. He knows that ancient historiographical standards were different from ours. Better still is the return of many Traditionist theologians to the medieval fourfold sense that restores a theological reading of Scripture, rejecting the modernist assumption that every biblical text has only one meaning, which is whatever the human author originally intended. More and more Traditionist theologians are recovering this theological reading of Scripture as the foundation of systematic theology, finding the "literal" sense which corresponds to what we call the literary but not literalistic meaning.[48]

Another way to understand this growing divide in evangelical theology is to listen to Meliorist responses to charges that they are following in the path of Schleiermacher, the father of liberal Protestantism. Olson, their most distinguished thinker, says that his theology is not at all similar to Schleiermacher's because the German professor-pastor did not believe in supernatural conversion (and Olson does), taught a universal God-consciousness that is in all human beings and is the essence of religious experience (Olson's account of faith is Christ- and cross-specific), and gave to that God-consciousness a higher authority than Scripture (Olson says revelation is first-order speech). Fair enough. On the content of Christian faith and the role of Jesus Christ, Olson is no Schleiermachian.[49]

Yet critics could be forgiven for noticing similarities between Schleiermacher and Meliorists on the relative importance of doctrine. For both, doctrines are "expressions" of spiritual experience, and experience is the center and essence of faith—more important than creeds. Now Olson and Grenz have written repeatedly that doctrines are not *merely* expressions of faith, and that God through Scripture speaks from outside the self to challenge and transform the soul—while for Schleiermacher there is no external authority that takes precedence over the immediate experience of believers. Yet for both Meliorism and Schleiermacher piety is more important than doctrine, Christian experience of greater significance than its creedal formulation. Schleiermacher's doctrine of Scripture was also remarkably similar to the Meliorist view. Curiously enough, the German theologian started with or-

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[47] See McGrath, "Faith and Tradition."

[48] See Vanhoozer, "Scripture and Hermeneutics."

[49] Olson, *Reformed and Reforming* 61–63, 76–77; Professor Olson saw several drafts of this chapter in advance, and it is better because of his suggestions. He does not agree, however, that what I call Meliorism may be headed toward liberal Protestantism.

thodox commitments, as do Meliorists. For example, the father of liberal theology held Scripture to be the "norm for all succeeding presentations." He said each part of the Bible was to be interpreted in light of the Bible's great theme, Christ. So far, so good. But then, just as Meliorists often do, Schleiermacher insisted the Bible itself cannot be equated with revelation. He said revelation is instead Christ himself, who imparts his own God-consciousness to the believer from the outside. The words of the Bible are not God-given but represent human reflection on religious experience.[50]

So while most Meliorist conclusions are orthodox, their views of Scripture and experience converge with Schleiermacher more than most want to admit. This is why Meliorist evangelical theology may resemble that of liberal Protestantism before too long, even though the top Meliorist theologians will reject that move. As in any movement, epigones are more consistent with their mentor's principles than the mentors were. Theological innovators are more willing to hold in tension competing principles, but disciples collapse those tensions. If professed commitment to orthodoxy conflicts with theological method, disciples will follow that method to its liberal conclusions. Karl Barth denied he was a universalist, but his epigones typically followed Barthian principles to their logical conclusion and found hell to be unpopulated.[51] Similarly, Meliorists locate authority not in Scripture itself but an ambiguous "revelation," while some say more directly that "God's word … is an event mediated by the Bible and not the book itself" (Dave Tomlinson), and that (not surprisingly) they "don't know what to think" about homosexuality, hell, penal substitutionary atonement and a host of other teachings in the Great Tradition (McLaren).[52]

Nearly twenty years ago James Davison Hunter famously distinguished between the "orthodox" and "progressive" moral sensibilities in our broader culture. The orthodox, he proposed, believe in "external, definable and transcendent" standards for morals and life, while progressives tend to resymbolize historical faiths according to "prevailing assumptions of contemporary life."[53] The current divide in evangelical theology does not precisely follow Hunter's dichotomy, for Meliorists teach transcendence and external standards. But so did Schleiermacher, who also and importantly defined true religion as experience that is not intrinsically tied to any specific doctrinal formulation. The result was then and is now a faith that is curiously non-definable and hyper-attentive to "prevailing assumptions of contemporary life." Just as Hunter's orthodox and progressives have moved even farther apart in these last twenty years, so too will Meliorists and Traditionists. In another twenty years, Meliorists may have difficulty being recognized as evangeli-

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[50] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (ed. H. R. Mackintosh; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 62–68, 594, 597–98, 594–96, esp. 593.

[51] See, e.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.3.1 (Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 2010) 354–55.

[52] Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003) 120; for McLaren, see McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point.*

[53] James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) 45.

cals, and, like the liberal Protestants they might come to resemble, they will also have trouble filling their pews.

Is there a way to avoid division? Perhaps. A few things would be required. First, evangelical theologians would have to look more seriously at their own tradition. Their greatest theologian, Jonathan Edwards, professed repeatedly that our only authority in religion is the written text of the Scriptures. But in practice he operated with the tacit recognition that the Bible can be read only through and with tradition. And that ultimate religious authority is mediated by God through a story of divine redemption, which is known by theological reflection and transmitted through a theological tradition. Therefore tradition, whose importance he often downplayed, proved to be more significant for the evangelical theologian in actual practice. John Wesley, while not a systematic theologian but a powerful theological thinker in his own right, showed keen interest in the Great Tradition and was chary to subvert it.

Second, evangelical theology would need to renounce the triumphalism that has heretofore treated church history as little more than darkness before the Reformation or 18th-century awakenings. It would need to adopt a new attitude of intellectual humility—a certain willingness to submit to a vision of the whole that can be found only by living in the whole (theological) tradition.

Third, evangelical theologians need to beware the peculiarly academic sort of ambition that seeks acceptance and recognition by our liberal colleagues. We want their approval, and so we are tempted to write and teach what will be more consistent with the academy's moral and theological sensibilities. Or we seek the thrill of intellectual sophistication that is unencumbered by traditional formulations. But as Donald MacKinnon once observed and William Abraham has reminded us, the great orthodox creeds are the ordinary Christian's protection against the ingenuity of the wise and intellectually superior.[54] These days the most common temptation is to disconnect moral theology from dogmatic theology, saying in neo-Pietist fashion that doctrine and morality are finally unimportant as long as there are warm, fuzzy feelings about Jesus. Or we reduce Scripture to the human expression of religious experience, finding revelation somewhere other than in the biblical text itself. In the process, however, we have run roughshod over Scripture's claim for itself as "*words* taught not by human wisdom but by the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:13).[55]

I will go so far as to say that if evangelical theology does not adopt these suggestions, it will not survive. But it will strengthen itself and preserve itself against internal dissolution if it sees itself as a reform movement in the church catholic. The monastic movements, the Clunian reform movement, the Dominican preach-

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[54] D. M. MacKinnon, *The Church* (London: Dacre, 1940) 50; cited in William J. Abraham, "Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology," in Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 57.

[55] This is not an assertion that revelation is found only in Scripture, for the Tradition has had much to say about general revelation outside Scripture. But it is to say that Scripture is our normative guide when interpreted by the Great Tradition (which includes creeds and liturgy and the Fathers and the sacraments), and its revelation is in, with, and under its words.

ing revival, the Franciscans, and the Reformation itself thrived and influenced the broader church by relating to and learning from the broader church. Only if evangelical theology sees itself as a renewal and reform movement raised up by the Spirit from amidst and for the purpose of the wider church catholic, and therefore learns from that universal church, will it save itself from disintegrating into even more subjectivist and individualistic sects, many of them neither evangelical nor orthodox.

Evangelicals have always put a premium on the local church. If they have talked about the universal church, typically they have thought only in terms of the universal church of fellow evangelicals. It is time for evangelicals to look more broadly, at the universal church beyond evangelical boundaries, not only around the world today, but especially to the last two thousand years of rich theological reflection.