

EVANGELICALS, ECUMENISM AND THE CHURCH

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[p. 347] “I will build my church”: at one level the declaration is bold and simple; at another it has generated countless complex debates characterized by fine philosophical subtleties and theological niceties. “I will build my church”: yet the statement in its biblical context (Matthew 16:13-20) rivals another dominical utterance, “This is my body,” for the heritage of heated division it has evoked within the church. “I will build my church”: yet millions of men and women who think of themselves as Christians ruefully confess they despise the church even

while they insist they worship Christ, while in many parts of the world the recognized and established “church” is being cheerfully abandoned in favor of a mushrooming phenomenon, the “house church” movement.

Both inside and outside the borders of evangelicalism there exists an enormous diversity of opinion regarding the nature of the church, her role in the history of redemption, her boundaries, her governance, and her unity. In the West, the essentially corporate nature of the church, however construed, butts up against our deeply-ingrained devotion to rugged individualism. Meanwhile, at the very moment when large swaths of evangelicals have overcome a defensive fortress mentality, not to mention cultural asceticism and denominational parochialism, the converse dangers are beginning to loom large: acculturation to the surrounding paganism instead of transforming infiltration, devoted attention [p. 348] to the plaudits of what John calls “the world” instead of a single-eyed commitment to please Christ, and a painful loss of confidence in the gospel in favor of fraternal relations with those who disown integral elements of that gospel. There was a time when virtually all evangelicals believed that they proclaimed the true and non-negotiable gospel; in the current environment, not a few evangelicals think they proclaim one form of the gospel. The gain in humility would be attractive were it not for the loss of confidence in the gospel itself.

Discussion of the issues has been hindered as much as it has been helped by recent studies that define one branch or another of evangelicalism in the categories of sociology, psychology and power politics.¹ It is not that such works contain no insights. The problem, rather, is that they ignore the heart of historic evangelicalism: its emphasis on truth, doctrine, Scripture and spiritual vitality, and their outworkings in life, witness and churchmanship. To skirt these issues in any treatment of the defining characteristics and motivations of evangelicalism is to transform the agenda, and thereby subvert evangelicalism, however unwittingly, from within.

No brief paper can claim to redress the balance. What I am setting out to accomplish is much more modest. While acknowledging the enormous diversity that lurks behind the contemporary rubric “evangelicalism” I want to address from a theological perspective those features of evangelical ecclesiology that ought to govern our self-understanding and therefore our relations with others. I shall proceed in three steps, followed by one or two concluding reflections. [p. 349]

[p. 382 (These footnotes are *endnotes* in the original.)]

¹ E.g. George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1987) (I am indebted to Prof. John Woodbridge for this reference); some essays in George Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University Press, 1987). For a careful analysis of the depreciation of theological categories in the definition of the movement, and of the corresponding rise of social science categories, cf. Douglas A. Sweeney, “The Neo-Evangelical Movement, 1941-1960: Toward a More Thorough Historiographical Approach” (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, forthcoming).

A. The Problem of Evangelical Self-Identity

Two facets of the problem deserve a little probing here:

(1) Who is an “evangelical”?

The term “evangelical” may be approached from several different standpoints.² In North America, it functions predominantly to refer to Christians who are loyal to both a material principle and a formal principle. The material principle is the gospel as understood in evangelical protestantism. We insist that salvation is gained exclusively through personal faith in the finished cross-work of Jesus Christ, who is both God and man. His atoning death, planned and brought about by his heavenly Father, expiates our sin, vanquishes Satan, propitiates the Father and inaugurates the promised kingdom. In the ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, God himself is supremely revealed, such that rejection of Jesus, or denials of what the Scriptures tell us about Jesus, constitute nothing less than rejection of God himself. In consequence of his triumphant cross-work, Christ has bequeathed the Holy Spirit, himself God, as the down payment of the final inheritance that will come to Christ’s people when he himself returns. The saving and transforming power the Spirit displays in the lives of Christ’s people is the product of divine grace, grace alone — grace that is apprehended by faith alone. The knowledge of God these evangelicals enjoy becomes for them an impetus to missionary outreach characterized by urgency and compassion. The *formal* principle is the truth, authority and finality of the Bible.

This summary, or something like it, most self-confessed evangelicals would happily espouse. In this sense, “evangelicalism” is tightly tied to the “evangel” (*to evangelion*), the gospel of Jesus Christ. [p. 350]

We must frankly admit that “evangel” and “evangelical” are sometimes used in contexts rather removed from historic “evangelicalism.” To put the matter another way, who defines what this gospel-content, this evangel-content, really is? How many serious churchmen in any tradition would choose to be called un-evangelical? That is why this same etymological rootage also accounts for the use of *evangelisch* in German to mean roughly “Protestant,” for the use of “evangelical” in the title of the most recently formed Lutheran group in the U.S.A. (even though large swaths of that group are classically “liberal”), and for the appearance of the word in an institutional title such as “Garrett-Evangelical.”

If for our purposes we restrict the word to refer to the evangelical *movement*, historical (as opposed to theological) concerns come into play. “The Evangelical Awakening,” known on this side of the Atlantic as “The Great Awakening,” rejected high church theology, spiritually

² For useful taxonomies of the meaning of ‘evangelical’, cf. amongst many contributions Bruce Shelley, *Evangelicalism in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, ed., *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975); James Leo Garrett, Jr., “‘Evangelicals’ and Baptists — Is There a Difference?” in James Leo Garrett, Jr., E. Glenn Hinson and James E. Tull, *Are Southern Baptists “Evangelicals”?* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1983), especially pp. 33-63.

bankrupt deism and an orthodoxy of convenience in order to emphasize the truths and vitality I have sketched in. Thus, against high churchmanship, evangelicalism stressed the sufficiency and finality of Scripture (over against a too ready appeal to the voice of tradition), the finality of Christ's atoning death (over against any view that posits an overly sacramentarian theology), and the priesthood of all believers (over against a sacerdotal view of Christian ministry).

In time, however, the impact of the Enlightenment made itself felt at the popular level in the depreciation of the authority of Scripture. Thus, evangelicalism, which had always assumed and sometimes articulated the inerrancy of Scripture,³ turned to confront this new danger on its flank. In consequence, evangelicalism [p. 351] came to be thought of as a movement characterized by low churchmanship, a high view of Scripture, and evangelistic zeal.

It is quite beyond the scope of this paper to sketch in the complex relationships between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, or to trace the Phoenix-like rise of evangelicalism in this country following WWII. It is enough to point out three factors that bedevil recent attempts to define evangelicalism:

(a) As recently as 1975, an observer as astute as Martin Marty⁴ could insist that evangelicals and fundamentalists alike were committed to an inerrancy view of the Bible. This is no longer the case. Many self-styled evangelicals now affirm the "infallibility" of Scripture, understood as referring to Scripture's truthfulness exclusively in matters of "faith and practice." The "faith and practice" formula at the time of the Reformation was meant to be an *inclusive* category, over against the claims of the Roman Catholic Church to have the right to prescribe in these areas. But some modern evangelicals wield the expression in an *exclusive* way, refusing to acknowledge that the Bible is reliable on whatever subject it chooses to speak. In evangelical academic circles, the change in the last decade and a half or two decades is remarkable. This stance has bred some even more startling hermeneutical shifts. For instance, one major evangelical scholar, whose positive contributions have been incalculable, nevertheless recently argued that any passage in the Pauline corpus that seemed to curtail the principle of freedom espoused by the apostle should be ignored by Christian ethicists.⁵ Such "evangelicalism" the evangelicals of a bare twenty-five years ago could not possibly have recognized. [p. 352]

(b) Many evangelicals in the vanguard of the movement happily apply the label "evangelical" to confessional Lutherans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals and others (such as Fundamentalists) who do not think of themselves in this category. Mainstream evangelicals who extend the label beyond themselves are not insensitive to the distinctive emphases of these other groups; rather, since the truths and outlook that define the movement are shared by many people

³ It is quite mistaken to think of "inerrancy" as a modern category adopted by conservatives who are lurching still further to the right: cf. John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers / McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

⁴ Martin E. Marty, "Tensions Within Contemporary Evangelicalism: A Critical Appraisal," in David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 170-188, esp. 173.

⁵ F.F. Bruce in an interview with Ward and Laurel Gasque, in *Christianity Today*, forthcoming.

from these groups, they mean thereby to establish their own catholicity. Meanwhile, Presbyterians are inclined to see themselves less as a branch of evangelicalism than as a branch of the Reformed tradition; Pentecostals see themselves less as a branch of evangelicalism than as a branch of the holiness tradition; and Lutherans see themselves as — well, just Lutherans. Although mainline evangelicals are inclined to view Fundamentalists as evangelicals who unwisely permitted themselves to be defined too much in terms of reaction to their perceived opposition, rather than by the Bible, Fundamentalists not infrequently dismiss mainstream evangelicals as compromisers who are only one step away from heretical liberalism. The distinction in perception is reminiscent of the old anonymous ditty:

He drew a circle and left me out —
Heretic, outcast, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in.

Thus, unrepentant, I will include Fundamentalists amongst the evangelicals. Casting the net farther back in history, contemporary mainstream evangelicals find an “evangelical spirit”⁶ in [p. 353] many groups of the past two millennia, including groups that never thought of themselves as “evangelicals.” The inherent ambiguities generate numerous problems in self-definition.

(c) A further pressure on the term arises from the fact that for many evangelicals the expression is almost synonymous with “true Christian.” If evangelicalism is unyieldingly tied to the true evangel, if whole-hearted embrace of evangelicalism affirms the truthfulness of the Bible and elementary but profound Christological confessions, not to mention new birth and evangelistic zeal, then we are only a whisker from concluding that non-evangelicals are non-Christians. Suppose, then, someone drops one or two of the historic distinctives of evangelicalism, and calls the hybrid result, say, “liberal evangelicalism” or “[Roman] Catholic evangelicalism.” To say such people are *not* evangelicals sounds too much like saying they are not Christians. But if they are Christians in any sense of that word, most evangelicals would want to refer to them as “evangelicals.” Thus is born the pressure to apply the term to those who hold positions not traditionally “evangelical.” Properly speaking, the question then becomes, How much of historic evangelicalism can be abandoned before it is no longer evangelicalism? Out of this semantic pot-pourri emerge categories like (1) “consistent evangelical” — a category that is meaningful only if “evangelical” refers to a theological position, not to an experience of grace; (2) “liberal evangelical” — a contradiction in terms if “liberal” refers to major matters of doctrine and “evangelical” is historically defined, but a combination that is usually achieved by stripping “evangelical” of most doctrinal content in favor of a fairly sentimental experience of grace; (3) “Catholic evangelical” — which either means one is staunchly [p. 354] evangelical while trying to remain a member of the Roman Catholic Church; or, more commonly, that one is

⁶ To use the expression of R.V. Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” *EDT* 380.

trying to marry evangelical experience with Roman Catholic views of sacrament, priesthood and liturgy.

The combination of these pressures forces us to think of evangelicalism as a movement determined by its center, not its boundary. So understood (as it will be throughout the rest of this paper), contemporary evangelicalism, consistent and otherwise, embraces a wide range of people, but not all their theological opinions.

(2) How deep and diverse is evangelical ecclesiology?

Indeed, we could put the matter more cheekily and ask, “Is there such a thing as evangelical ecclesiology?”

Two rather different answers are possible. *First*, it must be frankly admitted that most evangelicals have devoted much less time to ecclesiology than to, say, bibliology, Bible exposition or the atonement. There are at least two reasons for this.

(a) It has been argued, persuasively, that most organizations or societies that focus inordinate attention on their own intrinsic nature and internal structure are contaminated with too much introversion and are already sporting signs of decay and death. Vitality and vibrancy are connected with a mission-focused, externally-oriented stance that may be self-aware but is not introspective. At its most potent, evangelicalism drums with the message of Christ crucified; it burns with evangelistic fire, and deals with questions about grace, sin, apologetics, holiness, outreach. With but few exceptions, it tends to address ecclesiological concerns only when the pragmatics of evangelical thought and mission demand some concrete answers. This is not all bad; [p. 355] indeed, it shares something of the flavor of the earliest decades of the Christian church.⁷ Although the modern critical consensus sometimes artificially imposes upon the New Testament documents the rigid model of a movement that develops from charismatic freedom to *Fruhkatholizismus* (“early catholicism”), there is enough validity to the model to mandate sober reflection. Mainline churches may with some justification brand not a few branches of evangelicalism “immature” because of their relatively unreflective ecclesiology; the more vibrant, expanding edge of evangelicalism may perhaps be excused for protesting that its adherents are too busy winning men and women to Christ, too busy building and nurturing the church, to have leisure for an exercise that sometimes appears (again, with some justification) not unlike navel-gazing.

To put the matter in more theological terms, the doctrinal and ethical concerns that tie together the diverse branches of evangelicalism have little to do with ecclesiology per se. There are many evangelicals who have written usefully and provocatively on the church, but by and large it is not their evangelicalism that has prompted them to do so. In short, evangelicalism as a movement is much more defined by Christology, soteriology and bibliology than by ecclesiology.

⁷ Cf. the central arguments of C.K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), esp. 74-75.

(b) In some sections of evangelicalism the failure to write massive tomes on the church is reflective of a self-conscious reaction against those quarters of Christendom that focus *too much* attention on the church. The ancient formula *credo ecclesiam* (“I believe in the church”) is interpreted by the latter as making the church an object of faith; an object of faith because she is the body of Christ, her head; as the body of Christ, the “great mystery” of [p. 356] Ephesians 5:32.⁸ It does not take many steps to make this church a mediator, like Christ himself; to assign to this church the deposit of revelation, instead of seeing that deposit lying in the Scriptures; and thus finally to interpret *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the church there is no salvation”) to mean not that the church is the community of those redeemed by Christ outside of which there is no salvation, but that the church is the community that so mediates salvation that apart from proper connection with her there is no salvation.

Understandably, evangelicals are less than persuaded by this chain of reasoning. To make the church an object of faith because she is the body of Christ is linguistically unwarranted and biblically forbidden. To link the “body of Christ” language with the theme of Christ’s headship fails to distinguish two quite different uses of “body” language applied to the church,⁹ and to draw a connection with the “great mystery” of Ephesians 5:32 is to ignore the paradigm of marriage that is its type. In short, though thoughtful evangelicals are happy to join in the *credo ecclesiam* (“I believe in the church”),¹⁰ this no more makes the church an object of faith than “I believe in the life everlasting” makes the life everlasting an object of faith. *Credo ecclesiam* is the believer’s way of affirming that the church, biblically conceived, is the locus of the redeemed, the community of the people of God, the fellowship of those who have savingly drunk from the well-springs of grace and who confess Jesus as Lord.

It appears, then, that evangelical slowness to articulate profound statements on the church springs partly from the fact that its driving impetus lies elsewhere, and partly from the theological suspicion that those who devote too much attention to [p. 357] the church are in danger of diverting attention from Christ himself. Though the suspicion rests on no internal necessity, history provides enough sorry witnesses to warrant some vigilance.

But a *second* answer to the question is possible. The problem is not that evangelicals, broadly conceived, have not produced thoughtful ecclesiology, but that they have produced too many ecclesiologies, or ecclesiological studies, ranging from the barely competent to the fairly sophisticated. Old-style dispensationalism so ties ecclesiology to its brand of eschatology that the church becomes a parenthesis in the plan of God. Covenant theology so ties the church to Israel, not only in promise and fulfillment but also in experience of God, that it is hard to see how the

⁸ So Andreas Rinkel, writing from the perspective of “The Old Catholic Church” (in R. Newton Flew, ed., *The Nature of the Church* [New York: Harper, 1952] 158), but similar sentiments can be found in Tridentine forms of Roman Catholicism, in some branches of Eastern Orthodoxy, in High Anglicanism and elsewhere.

⁹ Cf. Edmund C. Clowney. “The Biblical Theology of the Church,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 13-87.

¹⁰ Note the book by David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). [p. 383]

church is much more than a racially mixed and non-national Israel, a more knowledgeable version of the old covenant people of God: the olive tree metaphor (Romans 11) controls the discussion. Evangelical Lutherans continue to wrestle with Lutheran ecclesiology;¹¹ Reformed theology calls up, say, Bannerman¹² and Berkouwer.¹³ Wesleyans have tied their ecclesiology to the holiness movement.¹⁴ The literature is substantial on “the believer’s church” tradition that springs from Anabaptist roots, and contemporary Pentecostals are now raising their own ecclesiological voices.¹⁵ Popular books on the church abound, focusing primarily on practical concerns such as the nature of ministry, the lay / clergy tension, the importance of unity expressed in sacrificial love and the like.¹⁶

This diversity is more than a diversity of denominational labels. The central visions of the various branches of evangelicalism are, so far as ecclesiology is concerned, substantially different; the understanding of the nature and role of church ordinances/ [p. 358] sacraments is quite different; the church’s worship, mission and vitality are all quite differently construed; even the way the canon is put together to undergird the various ecclesiologies may be quite different. A cynic might be forgiven, then, for thinking that there is no such thing as a distinctive evangelical ecclesiology. The evangelical ecclesiologies (not the plural) that exist spring less from the central core of evangelical truth than from the ecclesiastical and spiritual formation each tradition represents *beyond* evangelicalism. The common core, the lowest common denominator, evangelicalism itself, has no integral ecclesiology.

The cynic, I shall argue, is wrong.

B. Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology

Perhaps I may be forgiven a personal note. In my capacity as Convenor for one of the Study Units of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, I have had occasion to work with evangelicals from around the world on a variety of projects. Two of these focused on the church — the first book dealing with the hermeneutics of the doctrine of the

¹¹ Most recently, Eberhard Hahn, *Wo ist die Kirche Jesu Christi? Theologische Beurteilung kirchlicher Trennungen anhand von Fallbeispielen* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1988); cf. Martin Heineken, “Is There a Growing Consensus on a Redefinition of the Church?” *Dialog* 14 (1975) 297-302.

¹² James Bannerman, *The Church of Jesus Christ: A Treatise of the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868).

¹³ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Studies in Dogmatics; trans. James E. Davison; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

¹⁴ Melvin E. Dieter and Daniel N. Berg, ed., *The Church: An Inquiry into Ecclesiology from a Biblical Theological Perspective* (Wesleyan Theological Perspectives IV; Anderson, IN: Warner, 1984).

¹⁵ E.g. John Amstutz, “Beyond Pentecost: A Study of Some Sociological Dimensions of Church Growth from the Book of Acts,” in Paul Elbert, ed., *Essays on Apostolic Themes *Fs.* Howard M. Ervin; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985) 208-225.

¹⁶ I have in mind the sort of thing exemplified by John Moore and Ken Neff, *A New Testament Blueprint for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1985).

church, and the second with major components to the doctrine itself. Our Study Unit brought together people from Africa, Latin America, North America, Europe, India, Australia and the Far East. They represented highly diverse strands of denominational affiliation: Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Presbyterian, Free Church, Lutheran, charismatic and others. Papers were assigned, prepared and circulated in advance, so that our meetings devoted most attention to discussing these papers, paragraph by paragraph, in light of our respective understandings of what the Bible says. What at first astonished me, and then pleased me no end, was the very high [p. 359] degree of unanimity we achieved in area after area of Christian thought. A common commitment to the authority of Scripture, enough humility and candor to make each participant teachable, and concentrated time together — these were the ingredients which under God produced books surprisingly unified.¹⁷

I have therefore become convinced that although we will not agree on every point of ecclesiology, we ought to do more to set forth the points we hold in common. Granted the nature of evangelicalism, these points are likely to be ones that are most tightly tied to our grasp of Christology, soteriology and bibliology. The theses that follow are not meant to be exhaustive; nor are they set out in order of priority; rather, they are representative of the kind of shared ecclesiological perspectives we should be striving for, and to which most of us could agree. Within the strictures of this paper, I can do no more than “prime the pump” at each thesis, even though more than one full-scale book cries out to be written in each instance.

(1) The church is the community of the new covenant.

In the sixth century B.C. the prophet Jeremiah, speaking for the LORD, foresees a time when people will no longer repeat the proverb, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Jeremiah 31:30). The history of Israel under the Mosaic covenant has been characterized by the outworking of this proverb. The covenantal structure was profoundly racial and tribal. Designated leaders — prophets, priests, king, and occasionally other leaders such as the seventy elders or Bezaleel — were endued with the Spirit, and spoke for God to the people and for the people to God (*cf.* Exodus 20:19). Thus when the leaders sinned, the entire nation was contaminated, and ultimately faced [p. 360] divine wrath. But the time is coming, Jeremiah says, when this proverb will be abandoned. “Instead,” God promises, “everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes — his own teeth will be set on edge” (Jeremiah 31:30). This could be true only if the entire covenantal structure associated with Moses’ name is replaced by another. That is precisely what the Lord promises: he will make “a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” that “will not be like the covenant” he made with their forefathers at the time of the Exodus. The nature of the promised new covenant is carefully recorded: God will put his law in the hearts and on the minds of his people. Instead of having a mediated knowledge of God, “they will all know me, from the least

¹⁷ D.A. Carson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984); *idem*, ed., *The Church in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

of them to the greatest,” and therefore “no longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD’” (31:31ff.). This does not foresee a time of no teachers; in the context, it foresees a time of no mediators, because the entire covenant community under this new covenant will have a personal knowledge of God, a knowledge characterized by the forgiveness of sin (31:34) and by the law of God written on the heart (31:33). “I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me” (Jeremiah 32:39-40).

On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus took the cup of wine and said, “This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20), and the church repeats the words to this day. The Epistle to the Hebrews unambiguously applies the [p. 361] words of Jeremiah to the church (Hebrews 8, 10). This means that, whatever complex relationships obtain between Israel and the church when the entire canon is considered, in this instance, at least, the connection is typological: the promise of the new covenant made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah, is applied by the Lord Jesus himself, and by the Epistle to the Hebrews, to the church. Hebrews goes farther yet, and insists that by calling this promised covenant “new” God “has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (Hebrews 8:13). Here and elsewhere in Hebrews, the Christian reader is instructed not to read the Old Testament a-temporally, but with eyes that detect sequence, before and after, the progress of redemptive history (*cf.* Paul’s argument in Romans 4 and Galatians 3). The church, the community of the new covenant promised by Jeremiah and inaugurated by Jesus’ blood, learns to read its place in God’s sweeping redemptive purposes.

Numerous theological and practical conclusions may be drawn from these biblical connections — though admittedly not all evangelicals would be happy with all of them.¹⁸ The basic truth, that the church is the community of the new covenant, is embraced by virtually all streams of Christianity. The peculiar evangelical contribution to this theme, however, is the staunch insistence that the *nature* of the new covenant not be overlooked: as foreseen in the prophecy of Jeremiah, it is the abrogation of an essentially tribalistic covenantal structure in favor of one that focuses on the immediate knowledge of God by all people under the new covenant, a knowledge of God that turns on the forgiveness of sin and the transformation of the heart and mind. And that brings me to my second thesis: [p. 362]

¹⁸ For instance, I would argue that although under the Mosaic covenant there is necessarily a distinction between the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect / redeemed / remnant, with circumcision being the sign of the former, under the terms of the new covenant the distinction is obliterated. The people of the new covenant have the law written on their hearts, by definition; i.e. the locus of the covenant community and the locus of the elect / redeemed / remnant become one. That suggests that baptism, for instance, cannot properly be a sign of the former but not of the latter.

(2) The church is the community empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Old Testament prophets not only foresaw the new covenant; they understood its motivating power to be the Holy Spirit. As we have already seen, under the constraints of the old covenant the Spirit was poured out on prophets, priests, kings and a select number of other individuals. Moses himself recognized the limitation: when Joshua complained that Eldad and Medad were prophesying in the camp and indignantly demanded that they be silenced, aged Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:27-29). But that, of course, is exactly what the prophets insisted would take place under the new covenant: God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, on young men and maidens as well as on prophets and priests. This Spirit is the agent that would enable them to follow God’s decrees and be careful to keep his laws (e.g. Isaiah 44:3-5; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32).¹⁹

It came to be understood, then that the messianic age would be the age of the Spirit. When John the Baptist announced that his successor, the one to whom he was pointing, would not baptize in water but in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11 par.), he was making a messianic proclamation, he was announcing the messianic age. The new birth in water and spirit (John 3:5) is rightly interpreted as an allusion to Ezekiel 36;²⁰ Jesus insists that Nicodemus should have understood what he was talking about, an indictment that gains bite because Nicodemus was “the teacher of Israel” (3:10) and should have followed Jesus’ reasoning from the Scriptures. “Water” and “spirit” come together in those Scriptures most tellingly at Ezekiel 36: God looks to the times when he will sprinkle “clean water” [p. 363] upon his people so that they will be clean, and “give them a new heart and put a new spirit” in them so that they will have a heart for obedience (36:25-27). Thus all Jesus has added is the “new birth” metaphor itself; its substance had already been foreseen by Ezekiel. What was required, what the new covenant promised, was a personal renewal, a “new birth” if you will, characterized by cleansing and transforming power.

Many New Testament passages converge on the same theme. In the Fourth Gospel, the Spirit, the Paraclete, is sent to all believers in consequence of the Son’s glorification via the cross and resurrection. In Paul, the Spirit is the “down payment” or “guarantee” of the promised inheritance of the last day; indeed, “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Romans 8:9). In short, whatever disagreements evangelicals may entertain about the operations of the Spirit, most would agree that in the New Testament the church is the community empowered by the Spirit, and that this fact controls not a little of the inaugurated eschatology. This drives us to the third thesis:

¹⁹ For more extensive probing of the first two theses, cf. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), esp. chapter 5.

²⁰ Cf. Linda L. Belleville, “‘Born of Water and Spirit’: John 3:5.” *Trinity Journal* 1 (1980), 25-41; D.A. Carson, *John (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming) in loc.*

(3) The church is an eschatological community.

The systems of belief that divide evangelicals in the area of eschatology are very substantial, and deserve continued study and reflection. But unless I am misreading Western evangelicalism rather badly, there is growing unanimity on this third thesis. Whatever our understanding of the future displays of God's kingship in Christ, we hold that the culminating, saving reign of God has already dawned in a preliminary fashion. Even within the ministry of Jesus, that saving reign, the kingdom of God, had dawned: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28). God has already "rescued us [p. 364] from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Col. 1:13). We confess that "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men" (Romans 14:17-18).

The texts could easily be multiplied; this thesis is the very stuff of New Testament thought. The church is the exemplification of the running tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Yet it is extremely important to be sure of what should and should not be drawn from this reality. I am not trying to leap from this thesis — that the church is an eschatological community — to full-blown statements of "kingdom ethics," "kingdom theology," "kingdom power" or the like. R.T. France has adequately warned us against such leaps.²¹ My point is far simpler, and far more profound. Because the church is an eschatological community, its ties with the new heaven and the new earth are intrinsically more important and more enduring than its ties with this world that is passing away. Christians are citizens of the new Jerusalem; the church is oriented toward the consummation, and joins believers in every generation who cry, "Even so, come Lord Jesus!" This means, of course, that the church is an eschatological outpost in time; its very identity turns on this reality. That, in turn, entails numerous evangelistic, ethical and social responsibilities. But these responsibilities are based on the eschatological reality, not *vice versa*.

(4) The church is the "gathered" people of God.

It is well known that the Greek word *ekklesia* underlies our word "church," and the *ekklesia* in the hellenistic period means "assembly," [p. 365] "congregation" or "meeting," even in a pagan context (e.g., Acts 19:32, 39, 41). One of the most striking things about its use in the New Testament is that it occurs in the plural when referring to the various assemblies ("churches") of a region or province (e.g. "the churches of Judea," Gal. 1:22), but it is restricted to the singular when referring to assemblies of Christians in any one city. In cities like Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and Rome the Christians multiplied so rapidly that they could not possibly meet in one assembly; and even if they could have found a large enough venue, it was impolitic to meet that way and draw attention to their numbers. But although there were thus many "assemblies" or "congregations" in, say, Colossae or Jerusalem, Paul writes to the church at

²¹ R.T. France, "The Church and the Kingdom of God: Some Hermeneutical Issues," in D.A. Carson, ed., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984) 30-44.

Colossae and goes up to consult with the church in Jerusalem, not the “churches” at Colossae and Jerusalem.

These data are well known and have been used to spin off various theories about church government in New Testament times. This exercise in constructing a theory of governance is not without value, though in my judgment less can be securely based on these data than some would have us believe;²² theories of church government are better based elsewhere, with information from the distribution of *ekklesia* reduced to corroborative status. What is not usually given adequate treatment, however, is how the concept of “church” relates to the concept of “churches” in the New Testament; for the distribution of *ekklesia* in the New Testament documents is but a subset of this larger *theological* question.

Several recent studies have pointed the way forward. The “assembly” or “gathered group” that fundamentally constitutes the church is *theologically* construed in the sort of thinking reflected in Hebrews 12:22-24: [p. 366]

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the *heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God*. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, *to the church of the firstborn*, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (emphasis mine).

In other words, Christians participate in the heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church (*ekklesia*) of Jesus Christ. O’Brien and others²³ argue convincingly that it is this heavenly, eschatological, new covenant congregation that Paul has in mind when he refers to churches as “the church” (e.g., Jesus “is the head of the body, the church” [Col. 1:18]). This means that each local church is not seen primarily as one member parallel to a lot of other member churches, together constituting one body, one church; nor is each local church seen as the body of Christ parallel to other earthly churches that are also the body of Christ — as if Christ had many bodies. Rather, each church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church. Local churches should see themselves as outcroppings of heaven, analogies of “the Jerusalem that is above,” indeed colonies of the new Jerusalem, providing on earth a corporate and visible expression of “the glorious freedom of the children of God.”²⁴ That this model is city-based — this heavenly church is the church of the

²² For instance, for most of us it is less than obvious that these data can be used to support a theory of presiding bishops who exercise authority over elders. If such a theory were supported by clear statements in the New Testament, the distribution of *ekklesia* might well be taken as corroborative evidence; in the absence of such a theory, we discover that [p. 384] the same evidence can be made to corroborate one or two other theories of ecclesiastical governance just as well.

²³ Peter T. O’Brien, “The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *Church* 88-119.

²⁴ Cf. H. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith 3: Theology of the Spirit* (tr. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 206-207.

new Jerusalem — may go some way to accounting for the peculiar distribution of the singular form of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. [p. 367]

This way of looking at the church is predicated in part on the fact that the church is nothing other than the redeemed people of God,²⁵ and the people of God have been raised with Christ, hidden in him and seated with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:5, 6; Col. 2:12-13; 3:3). As Lincoln persuasively demonstrates, the notion that the church is *already* seated with Christ in the heavenlies is a kind of spatial equivalent to realized eschatology.²⁶

If this theological understanding of the church is basically right, then the ancient contrast between the church visible and the church invisible, a contrast that has nurtured not a little ecclesiology,²⁷ is either fundamentally mistaken, or at best of marginal importance.²⁸ Moreover, this stance is fundamentally at variance with the tendency in the Eastern Church to equate church and cosmos.²⁹ The failure to distinguish adequately between the two breeds a stunning silence in the area of theological ethics, especially in areas of conflict between the radical demands of the Lord Christ and the ostensible autonomy of worldly structures.³⁰

(5) The church is a worshipping community.

This thesis is no mere truism: the church may virtually be defined as “all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Worship is currently an “in” subject. Several notable books have appeared claiming to identify some of the distinctive hymns and liturgy of the first century church.³¹ Another volume ties true worship to mystery, Holy Communion and the “Canterbury trail.”³² Some popular treatments unwittingly raise profound problems because they evince little reflection on the biblical theology of worship.³³ On the other side of the issue, Prof. Marshall has pointed out that under the new covenant worship terminology derived from the Old Testament (*e.g. latreia/latreuo*; [p. 368] “to

²⁵ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Doctrine of the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 11-24.

²⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (SNTSMS 43; Cambridge: University Press, 1981).

²⁷ E.g. Bannerman, *Church* 29ff.

²⁸ O'Brien (“Church”) opts for the former; Edmund P. Clowney (“The Biblical Theology of the Church”) for the latter.

²⁹ Eric G. Jay (*The Church: Its Changing Image Through Twenty Centuries* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1977, 1978] 149) rightly summarizes: “The Church is also the image of the cosmos. Like the universe it unites things visible and invisible . . .”

³⁰ Thielicke, *Evangelical Theology* 3 218.

³¹ E.G. Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

³² Robert E. Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals Are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Waco: Word, 1985). Cf. his earlier *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

³³ E.g. R. Allen and G. Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel* (Portland: Multnomah, 1982).

draw near” language; etc.) is applied to what the Christian or the church is doing or ought to be doing all the time.³⁴ Christians did not think of their corporate meetings as times of worship, but as times of instruction and fellowship. Just as the epistle to the Hebrews finds the fulfillment of the Sabbath in the rest enjoyed by the people of God under the new covenant,³⁵ so the “drawing near to God” that once depended on rites that could be performed only on set feast days and by prescribed mediators now depends on the finished work of Christ and is thought of as ready access to the divine Presence.

One of the most thoughtful and balanced of writers in this area is D.G. Peterson.³⁶ He is deeply concerned to develop a biblical theology of worship. Like Marshall and others, he discerns the shift in terminology from the old covenant to the new, and observes how the emphasis on the cultic, the local, the scheduled is transcended in the freedom of our address to God by the mercies of Christ. Nevertheless he argues, on biblical-theological grounds, that this does not mean the church itself, in corporate meeting, does not give itself to worship. The worship that must characterize the church’s entire life, the worship that virtually defines the church, ought to be supremely evident when the church meets in corporate assembly.

In this framework, the frankly abysmal patterns and experiences of worship that characterize many evangelical churches in the west, both within and without liturgical circles, are fundamentally a reflection of the paucity of our knowledge of God. Our lives as Christians are not stamped with constant worship; small wonder our corporate meetings so frequently reflect the same bankruptcy. Doubtless there are many steps that could be taken to [p. 369] improve the situation; nonetheless, our sorry state of affairs is not amenable to drastic reformation by the simple expedient of adding or subtracting this bit of liturgy or that bit of informality. Reformation in this area turns on deepening our personal and corporate knowledge and experience of God. And that in turn depends on recovering the roots of evangelical spirituality, what Peter Adam calls “the spirituality of the word.”³⁷

In theory, then, evangelicals are those who claim to know God by faith in Jesus Christ, and worship him in spirit and in truth. We confess, with shame, that in many of our churches neither the knowledge of God nor the worship of God is very deep.

³⁴ I. Howard Marshall, “How far did the early Christians worship God?” *Churchman* 99 (1985) 216-229. Cf. Russell R. Shedd, “Worship in the New Testament Church,” in D. A. Carson, ed., *Church* 120-153.

³⁵ Evangelicals do not agree on what relationship the Old Testament Sabbath has with Sunday.

³⁶ D.G. Peterson, “Towards a New Testament Theology of Worship,” *RefThRev* 43 (1984)65-73; *idem*, “Further Reflections on Worship in the NT,” *RefThRev* 44 (1985) 34-41; and several studies in preparation. Cf. also Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (tr. Margaret Kohl; New York: Harper and Row, 1977) 261-2.

³⁷ Peter Adam, *Roots of Contemporary Evangelical Spirituality* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1988). [p. 385]

(6) The church is the product of God's gracious self-disclosure in revelation and redemption.

The thesis not only affirms God's gracious initiative to a fallen race and insists that the cross was more than exemplary but actually achieved our salvation; but it also reminds us that the church, which has received this authoritative revelation and experienced this gracious redemption, stands permanently under the authority of its head, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the focal point both of divine revelation and of divine redemption.³⁸

Although this thesis cries out for major expansion, the constraints of space and time allow me nothing more than the formulation of two conclusions. First, if this thesis is kept in mind, Christians will remember their place in the scheme of things. We are always debtors to grace, and we are profoundly suspicious of ostensible formulations of the gospel that jeopardize the freedom of that grace. Second, if what we know of God we have learned because of his own kind self-disclosure in revelatory event, in Scripture and supremely in the person of his Son, and if our [p. 370] knowledge of God at the subjective level has been brought about because of the atoning sacrifice of the Son, whose death redeemed us and gave us access to the throne-room of heaven itself, then we deny our understanding of Scripture and our experience of grace if we do not frankly order our personal lives and the church, our corporate life, by the same revelatory word. We believe in one holy, catholic, *apostolic* church. Insofar as God has revealed what the church ought to be, so far also must that revelation shape our categories, goals, structures, discipline, priorities, and destiny. To fail in this regard is to disown the God who has revealed himself to us.

(7) The church is characterized by mission.

Once again there are divisions of opinion amongst us as to how best to articulate this mission, how to relate evangelism to the relief of suffering, how to avoid paternalism, and much more.³⁹ But to sustain an evangelical view of the church entails commitment to mission, to service, to outreach, to evangelism. As the Father has sent the Son, so the Son has sent us (John 20:21). If the church is the body of the redeemed, the redeemed were once themselves "by nature objects of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3); and therefore with Paul we count ourselves under obligation to Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 1:14), knowing we are but poor beggars telling other poor beggars where there is bread. Because the Bible constrains our view of the human being, we cannot acknowledge as adequate that form of service which seeks to produce converts but does not minister to physical and temporal needs; because our message is "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20) we cannot acknowledge as *bona fide* mission that service which meets temporal needs but which does not seek to win the lost to repentance, new birth and faith. We confess with [p. 371] shame those instances where we have been doing no more than stealing sheep. But we

³⁸ Robert S. Paul (*The Church in Search of Its Self* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972] 284-9) is one of the few who, in attempting a fresh articulation of the theology of the church, begins with revelation.

³⁹ Cf. D.A. Carson. "Church and Mission: Reflections on Contextualization and the Third Horizon," in D.A. Carson, ed., *Church* 213-257.

gladly put up with derogatory remarks about proselytism from those whose syncretism, pluralism or universalism demands that no one is under threat of condemnation (except, perhaps, those who say we all are, apart from the intervention of the grace of God!).

These seven theses do not point the way toward a comprehensive evangelical ecclesiology. They are merely representative of the sweep of truths about the church that bind most of us together. I have either not probed or barely touched sacraments / ordinances, metaphors such as “the body of Christ,” the traditional “marks of the church” and much more besides. Nevertheless the articulation of these more-or-less common perceptions of the nature of the church has prepared us for the next step.

C. Evangelical Perspectives on Ecumenism

Emerging naturally from evangelical attempts at self-definition (Section A of this paper) and from the rudiments of evangelical ecclesiology (Section B), several important perspectives on ecumenism present themselves.

(1) By definition, the church is made up of regenerate believers.

This confession is nothing more than the entailment of the nature of the new covenant, the exemplification of realized eschatology. It is the corollary of understanding the church as the outcropping of the heavenly assembly gathered in the Jerusalem that is above. But this relatively simple point rapidly becomes complex.

First, there are complex issues within the camp. In theory, evangelicalism will not only prove reluctant to label those people [p. 372] “Christians” who know nothing of the regenerating, transforming, justifying, sanctifying power of God in their lives, but ideally evangelicalism will also be eager to admit to Christian fellowship and ecclesiastical unity all those who have truly come to know God. In reality, however, we discover that all sorts of barriers divide evangelicals from one another. We divide over baptism, forms of church government, election and predestination, eschatology, degrees of separation, styles of worship and much more. Although there are many cultural and historically “accidental” reasons for such divisions, the most fundamental reason lies with evangelical commitment to its *formal* principle, *viz.* the authority of Scripture, coupled with mutually contradictory interpretations of that Scripture.

In other words, our commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, the material principle of evangelicalism, is itself grounded in the formal principle, the reliability and truthfulness of Scripture; but the latter ensures that what the Bible seems to be saying about, say, baptism, must also be taken seriously. If then there are differences of opinion as to what the Bible actually says on this point, the formal principle of evangelicalism, one of its great, unifying foci, becomes the basis for considerable division. Historically, those denominations that achieve unity amongst diverse groups of genuine believers generally achieve this victory by implying that certain points of biblical revelation are not very important. If both credo-baptists and paedo-baptists are admitted, there cannot be a very strongly articulated view of baptism. If both Calvinists and

Arminians are admitted, then although individual Christians may have strong views as to election, irresistible grace or the freedom of the will, the church as a whole has invariably [p. 373] relegated such matters to the status of the *relatively* unimportant. In one sense, that is of course correct. Nevertheless it is easy to understand why in the view of some — especially those who find it difficult to “hierarchialize” their beliefs — the authority of Scripture itself seems to be depreciated.

The second point of complexity concerns the ecclesiology of evangelicals who choose to live and serve in “mixed” churches. Some of these evangelicals deny the rightness of the “believers’ church tradition” implicit in the new covenant and the promises of the Spirit. They call to mind the parable of the wheat and the tares — though in fact that parable portrays the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 13:24-30), not the church.⁴⁰ Or they point out that empirically all churches eventually attract their own proportion of spurious saints — which is doubtless true, but irrelevant to the nature of the church, since John, for instance, nicely distinguishes between being “with us” and being “of us” (1 John 2:19). Or they remind us of the deplorable state of several of the churches in Rev. 2-3, so deplorable that they are about to inherit wrath, to be uprooted, vomited out, even while still being referred to as “churches” — though the same evidence might suggest to some that if the protracted warnings are carried out, the threatened wrath will effectively “unchurch” the churches in question, while only those Christians who endure to the end will be saved and receive the crown of life, and truly prove to be the church.

Others depend much more on pragmatic arguments. Jonathan Fletcher, who ably serves Christ in the Church of England, points out⁴¹ that in the Thirty-Nine Articles, Article 19 (which defines the church) makes no mention of a *national* church; nor do the formularies. Though he is in the minority, he holds he is more [p. 374] faithful to the church’s foundations, *viz.* the Articles and the formularies, than are the majority of the church’s leaders. Meanwhile he fears the tendency toward schism displayed by other groups (a variation on the *first* complexity, just discussed), for does not Jesus himself pray for the unity of the church (John 17), and insist that the world will recognize his disciples by their love? In any case he finds the Church of England, in his context, the best boat from which to fish. Analogous arguments are advanced by evangelicals in this country’s mainline denominations. The point of protest or even separation is crossed when such a denomination adopts an official stance that many judge unbiblical, and requires its clergy to do the same — *e.g.* the ordination of women. Schism is introduced after all. At the end of the day, the question reduces to what we shall fight over, and why.

My point in these somber reflections is not that all the choices are easy ones, nor that there are no “right” positions, but that evangelical theology, to be consistent with itself, must adopt as a limiting guideline that the church is made up of regenerate believers.

⁴⁰ The distinction between the kingdom and the church is not one of chronology, but of category: the kingdom is primarily the display of God’s saving sovereignty, while the church is the people of God.

⁴¹ In *Evangelicals Now* (Jan. 1989) 11.

(2) It follows, then, that church discipline must be practiced.

Historically, church discipline has sometimes been designated the third mark of the church (immediately following the right preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments / ordinances, the “visible work”).⁴² Church discipline runs the gamut, personal encouragement and confrontation to the final sanction, excommunication — a sanction not to be administered hastily or without tears, and only for three kinds of offenses.⁴³ Church discipline is not only illustrated in Scripture; it is virtually mandated by the nature of the church. And it must be [p. 375] said, with profound regret, that the failure to exercise firm, compassionate discipline now extends way beyond mainline churches to those that have sprung from the so-called “believers’ church tradition.” The failure is particularly transparent when local churches boast of “membership” numbers several times larger than the largest of its meetings.

Those of us who have moved between congregations adhering to the “believers’ church tradition” and larger ecclesiastical bodies are the first to reflect on the fact that there is often a fair bit of misunderstanding on both sides. Evangelicals who identify with the believers’ church tradition sometimes give the impression that evangelicals in the national or mainline denominations do not want to have a pure church, a confessing church. This, demonstrably, in most instances is not true. But many of the latter think of the believers’ church movement as sectarian, rigid, exclusivistic; and this, usually, is uncharitable and untrue. Those within mainline denominations usually see the problem as one of strategy and charity: strategy, in that they see themselves to be reclaiming historic denominations, and charity, in that they are temperamentally given to include as Christians those within their denomination’s ranks who have not fallen into positive heresy or apostasy. Those within the believers’ church tradition are inclined to interpret such thinking as a loss of nerve, an equivocation before the demands of Scripture. In any case, the two positions place themselves at different points along a spectrum, not in diametrically opposite camps.

It would profit little to probe the rights and wrongs of each position here. This much must be said: If the theological reasoning and presupposed biblical underpinnings lightly traced out in this [p. 376] paper are correct, all of us must come to grips with the mandate of biblical discipline, and ask how far our own churches approximate to it.

At another level, it is the logic of church discipline that makes “cooperative evangelism” between evangelicals (broadly conceived) and others such a troubling point for so many of us. It is the same logic which makes most of us less than eager to cast our lot with the WCC.

⁴² Bucer emphasized this third mark, while Luther, Melancthon and Calvin emphasized the first two (though there are certainly adumbrations of the third in Calvin). Cf. Paul D.L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 48-50.

⁴³ Viz. the denial of certain cardinal truths; the impenitent practice of immorality; and divisive lovelessness.

(3) From an evangelical perspective, it is not strictly necessary to list the sacraments / ordinances as one of the defining marks of the church, even though the overwhelming majority of us are happy to do so.

Otherwise we could not conceive of evangelical Salvationists, Quakers and others. This perspective is merely another way of saying that evangelicals do not elevate sacraments / ordinances to the level of *primary* importance. There are profound differences amongst us as to what these rites of the church mean, and how much prominence they should be given; but there is agreement that the Lord's Table must not be construed as of rival importance to the completed cross-work of Christ himself. The reason why, notwithstanding these comments, most of us are happy to list the sacraments / ordinances as the second mark of the church is because most of us, appealing to the formal principle that binds us, understand Scripture to teach that these rites should be perpetuated in the church. Even so, that does not mean we place these rites in the same category of things essential to salvation as, say, the vicarious sacrifice of Christ.

(4) A Christian who detaches himself or herself from the church, or a “parachurch” group that is largely independent of the church, is self-contradictory.

Of course, slippery language [p. 377] lurks in this sentence. There is a profound sense in which it is impossible for a Christian not to be part of the church. The language of self-distancing, however, comes from some Christians who are rugged individualists and from some parachurch groups that speak of the failures of the church which they are seeking to put to rights not by reforming the church but by running competition. But if the thrust of this paper is even approximately right, then such Christians are the church, or, more accurately, they cannot escape being members of this body.

The question then becomes, How as members of the body of Christ, the church, shall I (or we) seek to be related to other Christians? The same formal principle of authority to which they appeal in other areas of doctrine must again prevail. At once all the questions of sacrament / ordinance, church government and accountability, offices / functions within the church, diversity of gifts, and relation between gift and office,⁴⁴ surge forward *from the text of Scripture itself*. It will not do for a parachurch organization to duck such questions on the ground that the organization itself is not a church. At the most profound level, the Christians who constitute this parachurch organization inevitably belong to the church. Why then should they not comport themselves in line with what the acknowledged authority, the revealed Scripture, prescribes for the church? The answer has been that although they belong to the church invisible they choose not to belong to the church visible; or, alternatively, they seek a form of “belonging” to a local church, the church visible, that leaves them free to pursue their own ministry. But the distinction between the church visible and the church invisible is, as we have seen, largely artificial. And once that distinction has been all but eliminated, [p. 378] replaced by eschatological and

⁴⁴ Cf. Ronald Y.K. Fung, “Ministry in the New Testament,” in D.A. Carson, ed., *Church* 154-212; D.A. Carson, “Church, Authority in,” *EDT* 228-231.

“heavenly dimension” categories, there is less room to hide. The church on earth is the manifestation of the heavenly assembly; and the church on earth, in confessing Jesus as Lord, commits itself to living in obedience to his word. That certainly includes church life, so far as we understand it.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not consigning all parachurch groups and disgruntled individualists to the abyss. What I am saying is that the stereotypical position of such groups and individuals is profoundly inconsistent, when measured by biblical norms. It is therefore encouraging to note the number of such parachurch groups that are strenuously seeking not only to establish closer ties with churches, but closer accountability — indeed, *to see themselves and to be seen by others* as arms of the church, extensions of the church.

(5) Evangelicalism’s views of Scripture and of the church make sustained cooperation with classic liberalism or with traditional Roman Catholicism extremely problematic.

Of course, co-belligerency on some points may be wise and practical — *e.g.* working with Roman Catholics on the abortion issue, or with theological liberals on some genuine issue of social justice⁴⁵ or environmental stewardship. But sustained cooperation remains difficult and dangerous.

Consider Roman Catholicism. In their recent “Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism,” the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Ad Hoc Committee on Biblical Fundamentalism, while praising the zeal of “fundamentalists” (their use of the category shows they include evangelicals under this rubric), deplored the view that “the Bible alone is sufficient,” reduced the authority of Scripture to the position [p. 379] espoused by Vatican II,⁴⁶ appealed to “the Spirit-guided tradition of the church and the inspired books,” insisted that “the fullness of Christianity” demands “the eucharist and the other six sacraments, the celebration of the word in the liturgical cycle, the veneration of the Blessed Mother and the saints,” defended the view that the Pope is “the universal shepherd” in succession from Peter, praised the versions of the Bible “with an imprimatur,” and more.

We may be grateful for their candor; the theological chasm between us remains wide. However much we may be grateful for foundational points of agreement — *e.g.* belief in the Trinity, recognition that sin is an offense before God that must be dealt with, concern for the family, opposition to abortion, belief in the resurrection — the points that divide us are not minor. We do not agree with Roman Catholics about the locus of revelation, the definition of the church, the means of grace, the source of contemporary ecclesiastical authority, the significance of Mary, the finality of Christ’s cross-work, and more. Though we recognize the immense

⁴⁵ Even here one needs considerable wisdom: cf. Ernest W. Lefever, *Nairobi to Vancouver: The World Council of Churches and the World, 1975-87* (Washington: Ethics and Policy Center, 1987).

⁴⁶ After several re-writings of an originally conservative document, Vatican II finally managed to say, on Scripture, nothing more than that “the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation II).

diversity of contemporary Catholicism, we do not find that official pronouncements since Vatican II have bridged the chasm that remains.

Those forms of so-called “liberalism” that disown the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his deity, his vicarious and penal atonement, and the reality of the resurrection do not provide much greater temptation to intimate relations. The recent dialogue between liberal theologian David L. Edwards and John Stott⁴⁷ shows that discussions may be worth having; it does not make us sanguine that the fundamental problems of unbelief are about to disappear. The differences of opinion regarding the [p. 380] authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, the nature of salvation *and therefore the nature of the church* are as wide as ever: indeed, the gap yawns wider.

One of the features of the book by Edwards and Stott is that Edwards chooses the topics for discussion. Because he sets the agenda, only rarely is he forced to face the problems that could be put to him from the evangelical side. In light of the drastic shrinkage that continues to plague virtually all liberal constituencies, it is only proper that we press several questions on them: What locus of authority is there that prevents endless shifts of theological position — positions that are trumpeted to the world as if they are prophecies but seem to us like echoes originating in the world itself, echoes now laced with religious overtones? What is the content of the evangel, and how do you arrive at it? There is neither evangelism nor evangelicalism without the evangel. What, then, is your vision of the church? We say, a little whimsically,

You say I am not with it;
My friend, I do not doubt it.
But when I see what I'm not with
I'd rather be without it.

Meanwhile, aware as we are of the burning need to demonstrate the love and unity that must be displayed in the lives of those who have closed with Christ, who have been justified by his death and resurrection, and who have by the Spirit already tasted the powers of the age to come, we who call ourselves evangelicals must strive to live out a practical ecumenism of the redeemed. In [p. 381] joint enterprises of evangelism, worship, instruction and service, opportunities abound.

D. Concluding Reflections

Evangelicalism is so diverse that its various branches will hear me in different ways. If we are to examine ourselves with integrity, we ought to pay closest attention to those parts least palatable to our own heritage.

Meanwhile, the secularization of the age (which does not mean that religion affects fewer people but that religion is so emasculated that its influence in human life is largely vitiated)

⁴⁷ David L. Edwards and John Stott, *Essentials: A Liberal- Evangelical Dialogue* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988).

challenges us with the sheer immensity of the hurdles before us. In many parts of American society, ecumenism has become a dead issue, not because it has either triumphed or been defeated, but because it has been outflanked. The great god most widely confessed as Lord in the American “naked, public square” is the great god Pluralism. What need of ecumenism if all “isms” are mere variations of a universal movement toward God? The view most widely despised in many reaches of American society is the one that says it is right and that others are wrong. And no view matters much anyway, except the one that worships Pluralism itself.

This is the time for evangelicalism to understand itself, to resist fragmentation, to return to basics, and to think through its mission in the light of the changeless evangel and the changing patterns of unbelief all around us. And if we love Christ, we will cherish the church, for it is written, “Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her to make her holy” (Ephesians 5:25-26). Our sole confidence is still in him who declared, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).