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John M. Hitchen

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## What it Means to be an Evangelical Today – An Antipodean Perspective

### Part Two

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*In the first part of his article, published in our January issue, Dr Hitchen outlined the various groups to be found within evangelicalism and identified two challenges that face the movement, the need for self-definition and the identification of boundaries, and the need to maintain ecumenism and avoid fragmentation. The author is currently Lecturer in Mission at Bible College of New Zealand and at Pathways College of Bible and Mission, Auckland, New Zealand.*

**Key words:** Theology; evangelicalism; New Zealand

#### Confirming our Core – Evangelical Essentials

Our next task is to clarify, and re-confirm our commitment to the essential core beliefs that indicate what it means to be evangelical today.

#### *Various Summaries*

Various recent assessments have identified a range of distinguishing doctrinal commitments that constitute the core of what it means to be an evangelical.

We can begin with a succinct antipodean statement from Leon Morris –

An evangelical is a gospel man, a gospel woman. 'Evangelical' derives from '*evangel*': 'gospel'. By definition an evangelical is someone concerned for the gospel. This means more than that he preaches the gospel now and then. It means that for him the gospel of Christ is central. It is, of course, his message and he preaches it, constantly. But it is more than a subject of preaching. The gospel is at the centre of his thinking and living.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Leon Morris, 'What do we mean by "Evangelical"?', *Working Together*, the magazine of the Australian Evangelical Alliance, 1998 Issue 4. <http://www.worldevangelical.org/textonly/3evangcl.htm>

Confirmation of this 'gospel-core' comes from the Canadian Director of the Overseas Ministries Study Centre, New Haven, Jonathan Bonk, who recently defined evangelicals as, 'Those who still believe the Gospel is Good News'.<sup>2</sup>

Alister McGrath lists 'six fundamental convictions' of evangelicalism:

- The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God, and a guide to Christian living;
- The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord, and as the Saviour of sinful humanity;
- The lordship of the Holy Spirit;
- The need for personal conversion;
- The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and for the church as a whole;
- The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.<sup>3</sup>

David Bebbington, writing as the historian of evangelicalism in Britain over the past two hundred years, gives four fundamental 'characteristics displayed by any evangelical group':

- 'One common feature is a stress on conversion' – 'conversionism';
- ' . . . a second characteristic of evangelicals is activism. The central task is normally evangelism, though social concern has often been yoked with it. . . .' – 'activism';
- 'A third characteristic is the great respect with which all evangelicals treat the Bible' – 'biblicism';
- 'A fourth characteristic has been . . . "The centrality of the cross". 'The redemptive work of Christ has been the focus of the habitual evangelical preoccupation with soteriology' – 'crucicentrism'.<sup>4</sup>

From a Canadian perspective, John G. Stackhouse Jr., suggests the five characteristics are:

- First, evangelicals believe and champion the gospel of God's work of salvation and particularly as it is focused in the person of Jesus Christ. Even more particularly, evangelicals teach and

2 As stated in personal conversation with Dr Chris Marshall in Auckland, July 2002.

3 Alister E. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993, 51.

4 David W. Bebbington, 'Evangelicalism in its Settings: The British and American Movements since 1940' in Noll, et al (Eds) *Evangelicalism*. . . , 366; Bebbington is summarizing his findings from *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1989. The four '-ism' words are from that book.

delight in the incarnation of the Lord and his inauguration of the kingdom of God, but they pay special attention – for they believe the Bible itself does – to the death and resurrection of Christ as together constituting the central event of God’s redemptive project. . . .

Second, evangelicals believe and champion the Bible as the uniquely authoritative rendition of God’s Word in words to us. . . .

Third, evangelicals believe and champion conversion as the correct way to describe God’s work of salvation in each Christian and as a reality to be experienced, not merely affirmed. . . .

Fourth, evangelicals believe and champion mission as the chief goal of Christian life on earth. At times such activism in seeking to bring to others both the message of salvation and the charity of Christ has meant that evangelicals have paid relatively less attention to worship, or theology, or the cultivation of the earth, and other expressions of the well-rounded Christian life. . . .

Fifth, evangelicals believe and champion these four elements of the generic Christian tradition in ways that other traditions do not . . . [so that] . . . transdenominationalism . . . is the fifth evangelical quality to round out our list.<sup>5</sup>

The common elements in these lists are evident and provide a helpful starting point for evangelical self-definition.

*Following Stott’s Trinitarian Lead – With some Kiwi Applications*

But John Stott, the doyen of recent British evangelicalism, raises concerns about these distillations and proposes a better way:

Is it altogether appropriate, I ask myself, that an activity like evangelism, an experience like conversion and an observation like the need for fellowship, even with their theological underpinnings, should be set alongside such towering truths as the authority of Scripture, the majesty of Jesus Christ and the lordship of the Holy Spirit? They seem to belong to different categories. . . . It would . . . in my view, be a valuable clarification if we were to limit our evangelical priorities to three, namely the revealing initiative of God the Father, the redeeming work of God the Son, and the transforming ministry of God the Holy Spirit. All our other evangelical essentials will then find an appropriate place somewhere under this threefold or trinitarian rubric.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Stackhouse, John G., Jr, ‘Evangelical Theology Should be Evangelical’, in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., (Ed), *Evangelical Futures*, 2000, 41-42.

6 John Stott, *Evangelical Truth*. . . , 28.

We shall use Stott's recommendation as our framework for clarifying the essential marks of an evangelical today. The burden of this paper is that we need to re-apply these central evangelical tenets, not merely as doctrines to die for, but as the functional centre by which we live every day. There have been several recent masterly discussions by respected mentors on 'Renewing the Evangelical Center',<sup>7</sup> 'The Characteristics of Evangelicalism',<sup>8</sup> 'Towards the Recovery of Biblical Faith',<sup>9</sup> and 'Evangelical Essentials'.<sup>10</sup> So there is no need for extensive clarification of these themes. Rather, I intend simply to make brief comments on how these core beliefs should be taken up in our daily life and work as evangelical Christians.

*The Authority of God in and through the Scriptures – The Revealing Initiative of God the Father*

I suggest there are three areas of thought and action for which, to be true evangelicals today, we need to take a fresh hold upon our core commitment to the authority of the Scriptures as God's self-revelation.

*For our Evangelical Epistemology – Renewing our Grasp on Revelation, Inspiration, Illumination and Authority.*

How we know truth – epistemology – has high priority in current theological and missiological debate, and is likely to retain this importance in the prevailing postmodern climate.<sup>11</sup> The challenge is for us to restate our understanding of the inter-related biblical themes of revelation, inspiration, illumination and authority to show how they offer creative alternative answers to key aspects of the postmodern critique of modern presuppositions about authority and ultimate knowledge. Jesus Christ as the subject of Scripture and focus of biblical authority must be kept central. Proper attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures for the believer will move us beyond wooden, rationalistic approaches to inspiration and

7 See Chapter Ten of Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-theological Age*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000, 325-351.

8 See Chapter Two of Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 49-88.

9 See Vol Two, Chapter XI, of Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 265-297.

10 See "Introduction" of John Stott, *Evangelical Truth*. . . , 15-39.

11 For a summary of current epistemological issues in the West and how they effect missiology see J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999; and from a more general theological perspective, Peter Hicks, *Evangelicals and Truth: A Creative Proposal for a Postmodern Age*, Leicester: Apollos, 1998.

revelation. We could do well to turn again to careful distinctions like those Donald Bloesch suggests:

In left-wing neo-orthodoxy revelation is dissolved in an existential encounter. In right-wing scholastic orthodoxy revelation is frozen into a propositional formula. In biblical evangelicalism revelation refers to the whole movement of God into biblical history culminating not only in the prophetic and apostolic witness but also in the act of faith and surrender on the part of those who are caught up in this movement. Thus the reader does not possess the truth, which would be the case if it were merely the writing of Scripture, but instead is possessed by the truth, which is the living, dynamic Word of God. . . . It is important to recover the dynamic and divine character of revelation without separating it from the earthen vessel of the Scriptural writings.<sup>12</sup>

*For the Story we Indwell – as our Plausibility Structure*

The return to understanding Scripture as narrative offers a way to bring a fresh presentation of an evangelical understanding of Scripture as God revealing himself authoritatively while avoiding charges of absolutism and lack of respect for the historical particularity both of the text and of our human contexts. With our evangelical commitment to ensure the Word of God shapes and controls our mind, we are well placed to implement Lesslie Newbigin's call to indwell the Scriptures as the hermeneutical structure that determines our worldview and through which we interpret the world around us, as Middleton and Walsh explain and Grenz explores.<sup>13</sup> By recapturing the relevance of interpreted narrative for our identity and authority as the people of God, and by allowing the Scriptures themselves to take the place of the discredited assumptions of the Enlightenment worldview as our basis for what is credible and real in the world – i.e., as our plausibility structure – we can offer an alternative set of interpretive keys for this otherwise meaningless contemporary society.<sup>14</sup> That is Good News indeed.

12 Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol II, 273-5.

13 J.Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*, 173-176; cf., Stanley Grenz on 'Theology as Conversation' and the use of speech-act theory to explain the Scriptures as the instrumentality of the Spirit, in 'Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism', in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation in Theological Method*, John G.Stackhouse, Jr. (Ed), Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000, 124-9; See Lesslie Newbigin's chapter on the Scriptures in, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1989.

14 I am aware of the criticism that the concept of "plausibility structures" is itself a carry-over from a certain phase of Enlightenment thinking. Nevertheless, I think it is a helpful construct when used as here defined – at least until a more helpful term has gained currency.

*For Our Proper Confidence – to Regain our Place in the Public Square*

A fresh hold on biblical authority grounded in clarity of thought about revelation, inspiration and illumination will also save us from the postmodern dangers of assuming all knowledge is relative and of despairing of ever finding dependable truth to live by. But it will also save us from the extremes of individualistic interpretations of Scripture and of claiming that our best formulation of biblical teachings is itself ultimate truth. Rather, to listen to Bloesch again:

Because the reality of Jesus Christ is more than rational, we can only approximate this transcendent truth in our conceptualization and verbalization. . . . We *intend* the truth in our theological statements, but we do not *possess* the truth, since reason is always the servant and never the master or determiner of revelation. . . . The ground of certainty is not what reason can show or prove but what faith grasps and knows as the human subject is acted upon by the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the reading or hearing of the biblical word.<sup>15</sup>

Thus we humbly hold to what we have already discovered of the truth of Scripture, but we also eagerly keep studying it, ever seeking the further light and the broader understanding that the Holy Spirit longs to break forth from its pages as we read it in fellowship with other believers who bring their own cultural perspectives to enrich our only partial grasp of its breadth and depth. This means moving beyond a concept of truth that assumes that I can define truth once for all in unchangeable propositions, such that anyone who disagrees with my definition must, ipso facto, be in error. Rather, we endorse the approach to Scripture Stott enjoins:

The hallmark of authentic evangelicalism is not subscription but submission. That is, it is not whether we subscribe to an impeccable formula about the Bible, but whether we live in practical submission to what the Bible teaches, including an advance resolve to submit to whatever it may later be shown to teach.<sup>16</sup>

Such an approach also helps free us from the abrasive, defensive dogmatism that we sometimes think is the only way to fulfill our custodial responsibility and that, by its overtones rather than its content, often penalizes us from gaining a hearing in the public forum. Post-modernity gives us as much right as anyone openly to present Gospel

15 Donald Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol II, 268-9.

16 John Stott, *Evangelical Truth*. . . , 73. Or, as Stott put it in an earlier article: 'The real hallmark of the evangelical is not only a present submission to what he or she believes the scripture teaches, it is a prior commitment to be submissive to what we may subsequently learn to be the teaching of scripture, whatever scripture may be found to teach', *EFAC Bulletin*, Issue 40 (Advent 1990), 3.

alternatives for national, societal, family and personal living. The challenge is first to restore to our church life that hunger and thirst for the Word of God, plus the submission to its authority over us as a community of believers, that will transform our life-styles and renew our discipleship so that Christ is actually able to lead and direct us through his Word. Then, secondly, we need to add to a new depth of clear thinking about the biblical teaching on justice issues and personal righteousness, the practical love beyond the local fellowship that earns us the right to be heard in public. That will then require us to develop the presentation skills that will enable us to master the media and bring depth of insight into the public debates. To be an evangelical today requires us to grasp these opportunities so as to reverse our communal slide into the famine of which Amos 8:11 warned so eloquently.

*The Majesty of Jesus Christ in and through the Cross – The Redeeming Work of God the Son*

Again, in regard to this second core belief, being evangelical today means applying our grasp of the deity, person and work of Christ across the full breadth of our Christian experience. The centrality of the evangel for evangelicals cannot be overstressed. We remain committed to the fact that there is one and only one historic Gospel – the apostolic Gospel as declared in the New Testament scriptures (Galatians 1:6-9).<sup>17</sup> We rejoice in the Good News value of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. This core belief in Christ's majesty displayed supremely in his redeeming death at Calvary must be central in at least the following aspects of our walk of faith:

*For Our Acceptance with God – Reconfirming the Biblical Breadth and Balance of Redemptive Metaphors.*

Our focus and emphasis upon the atoning death and resurrection of Christ as the only way to fellowship with God has been, and must always continue, as the heart of our message and the motivating dynamic permeating our behaviour and service. But, as I have set out fully elsewhere, for today's New Zealanders we need to recapture and utilize a firmer grasp of the full range of biblical metaphors that explain and apply the death of Christ. Our danger is that by unduly

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17 While acknowledging the vital importance in our ever changing context of regularly re-stating what we mean by 'the Gospel', we have not felt it necessary to repeat in this paper what we set out in, 'What is Our Gospel', Bruce Patrick, (Ed), *New Vision New Zealand: Calling the Whole Church to take the Whole Gospel to the Whole World*, Auckland, New Zealand, 1993, 146-157.



focusing on a single aspect of that death we leave believers stunted and ill-equipped to move on to the kind of mature walk with Christ that impacts our society. But we do not need to repeat our concerns in this regard.<sup>18</sup>

*For Our Discipleship Pilgrimage – Cultivating our Union with Christ, Being Transformed into his Likeness and Developing an Evangelical Spirituality.*

Traditional evangelical approaches to ‘follow-up’ have failed to produce mature servants of Christ who are changing our society for the glory of Christ. They have failed to challenge basic worldview level assumptions and win the battle for the Christian mind in Christ’s name. We have left unredeemed modernity’s deeply ingrained dualist distinctions between sacred and secular, material and spiritual, and body and soul. The result has been patterns of Christian living which make little contact between faith and work, church and state, or personal, family and communal rights and responsibilities. We have left whole areas of life – like the stewardship of possessions, resources and the environment – still outside the lordship of Christ.

As part of the necessary corrective we need a new focus on entering into an ongoing, living union with Christ as the flip side of accepting his work for us in salvation. We need ongoing discipleship pathways for the whole church that effectively produce progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ himself. The World Evangelical Alliance website, citing the United Kingdom Evangelical Alliance document, *What is an Evangelical?* stresses that ‘alongside what an Evangelical believes there should be a corresponding lifestyle.’<sup>19</sup> Our present-day context demands this combination of belief and action if we are to make any lasting impact on our societies.

Alister McGrath helps us here by highlighting the importance of developing an evangelical spirituality that speaks into the present-day realities of life and witness. He notes the way we have rediscovered and are picking up on the Catholic and Orthodox spirituality traditions.<sup>20</sup> But he also laments the lack of attention thus far to developing our own evangelical models. Particularly within the evangelical contribution to mission we have a wealth of spirituality that needs to be rigorously evaluated and applied to our contemporary service and ministry contexts. Our evangelical theological colleges have a special

18 See John M. Hitchen, ‘The Gospel for Today’s New Zealanders’, in Bruce Patrick, (Ed), *The Vision New Zealand Congress*, Auckland, Vision New Zealand, 1993, 29-44.

19 <http://www.worldevangelical.org/acute.html>, accessed September 2002.

20 Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, 123-138.

role in exploring, conserving, cultivating and articulating these aspects of spirituality and making them accessible to the wider church. This will call for discernment, critique and correction as well as sympathetic appreciation and advocacy of our heritage of devotional practice, patterns of discipleship and approaches to holiness. As McGrath also admits, there is a 'dark side of evangelicalism' that, in the area of spirituality, includes both 'guilt trips and burn-out' and 'the curse of the evangelical personality cult'.<sup>21</sup> The range of emphases in spirituality from our conservative to contemplative to charismatic sections of even the New Zealand evangelical community gives this kind of creative and self-critical attention to spirituality a relevance and importance as part of our evangelical identity and role today.

*For Our Goals and Service – Recovering Submission and Slavery to Christ.*

Our grasp of the centrality of Christ's person and work has to become more deeply integrated into our understanding of our own purpose and service. His suffering and death need to provide the model for our lifestyle and to characterize our involvement in the world around us. The radical nature of his humility, obedience to his Father and self-sacrificial surrender of himself in vicarious death needs to captivate us afresh until we imitate his way of life. Despite the unpopularity of such concepts in our contemporary contexts, the consistent call of the Scriptures is for submission both to God and to one another within all the social structures of our society; yielding plans and priorities to the will of God; and discovering the dignity and joy of becoming bond-slaves of the King of Kings – with eyes wide open to what that can and does entail by way of personal cost. Our postmodern, post-Christian world still waits for a living demonstration that Christ's followers, like their Master, know what it means to come 'not to be served, but to serve' (Mark 10:42-45).

*For Our Worldview – The Cross as the Observatory of the Universe and Christ as our Mind and Wisdom.*

As part of our 'indwelling of the Scriptures' we need to gain as a present-day evangelical distinctive such a grasp of the significance of Christ's death in God's self-revelation, in his mission and eternal purposes that we make the cross the foundational platform of our worldview. Rev Dr Henry Robert Reynolds, Principal of the Congregationalist Cheshunt College from the 1860s to 1890s repeatedly taught his students that 'the cross of Christ is the true observatory of the uni-

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21 *Ibid.*, 148-151 and 156-165.

verse'.<sup>22</sup> For Reynolds, whether you wanted to understand God's eternal purposes in history, God's revelation of his own nature, how to assess alternative religions; or how to discover the broader implications of 'modern science', the place and posture for learning all of this was to bow at the foot of the Cross and contemplate its message. In our jargon, Reynolds saw clearly that the Cross needs to regulate our worldview as Christians. This is true evangelical insight. And this is what has been missing from much of our discipleship of late. Until we 'bring every thought into captivity to Christ' (2 Cor 10:5), and allow him to so control our thoughts that we can say with integrity that 'we have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16), we shall continue to fall short of our evangelical norm. This narrative of the cross is the one narrative that has universal relevance and yet never becomes an exploitative power dominating people. The message of the cross never robs any person of their full humanity and dignity. It offers an in-depth answer to the postmodern dilemma that assumes universal meta-narratives are always abusive. When allowed to inform the fundamental understandings of the human mind this message of the cross proves to be the re-creative 'power of God' bringing that reintegration of the whole personality that the Bible calls 'salvation' (Rom 1:16).

*For Our Hope – Recovering Purpose for History and the Environment, and both Ppersonal and Cultural Destiny.*

The Enlightenment concept of continuing progress for humanity, despite the massive achievements of Western science, has proved vacuous in the face of equally massive societal and moral breakdown, and has brought only disillusion about purpose and destiny for human beings. Again, the eschatological dimension of the person, life, work, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ Jesus speaks right into this disillusionment. The evangelical has experienced a turning, called repentance, that transforms his or her understanding of time, history and the future. All are now imbued with meaning and purpose. Christ speaks hope and certainty about resurrection beyond death that is devastatingly relevant news in a frustrated post-modern context. Such insight enables us even to find some sense in the midst of the mysteries of evil and suffering. Hope does not remove the mysteries, but it points to One who in himself has tran-

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22 Henry Robert Reynolds, 'Ideals and Grace', *The Expositor*, 5th Series, Vol 1(1895), 78; See J.M.Hitchen, *Training Tamate: Formation of the 19th Century Missionary World-view* . . . PhD Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1984, 495.R. Reynolds and Thomas Binney, *Two Addresses Delivered at Cheshunt, October 9th, 1860*, London: Ward and Co., 1860, p.41; see J.M.Hitchen, *Training*.

scended their power and pain – thus creating the possibility of a similar experience for us. This hope is rooted in God's own disclosure of his ultimate plan to head up all things in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:9-11). This in turn breathes eschatological significance into the whole physical environment, despite the ambiguities and frustration manifest in it in the mean time (Rom 8:22-25). The reality of hope and purpose in history also enables the evangelical to recognize value and eternal significance in human cultural achievement, for it too will come under the ultimate headship of Christ and contribute to the glory of his final kingdom (Rev 21:24, 26). Herein is adequate foundation for an effective doctrine of work and vocation – long-held evangelical tenets that are once more becoming characteristic of the movement.

These brief notes must suffice to suggest the wide-ranging implications of our Christo-centric core beliefs awaiting evangelical out-working into lifestyle and worldview as well as faith.

*The Lordship of the Holy Spirit – The Transforming Ministry of God the Spirit*

The third core evangelical belief gives proper place to the person of the Holy Spirit and insists that the gospel is all about people entering into a living relationship with God the Spirit. Again, we draw attention to three dimensions in which we as evangelicals need to uphold this belief:

*For Our Christian Beginnings – Regeneration into a Transforming Friendship.*

The Holy Spirit alone can give new life. Every Christian is totally dependent upon God the Spirit for the experience the Scriptures describe as regeneration. From first to last the Holy Spirit initiates, guides and superintends the process by which each person becomes a Christian. From the first stirrings of conscience, to inner conviction, to the giving of life and on to all subsequent growth, the Third Person of the Trinity is active and enabling at every point. From the point of new birth each believer begins to draw his or her spiritual sustenance through a vital relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites each new believer into the body of Christ, the church, from the point of new birth. Evangelicals stress the indwelling of the Spirit within the believer, so that each Christian becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit in an ongoing, intimate relationship. The proper outcome of this relationship is a continuing harvest of the fruit of the Spirit in character formation in the Christian as the Holy Spirit graciously provides gifts and enabling for fruitful service for Christ.

*For Our Fellowship – Renewed Focus on Community and Life in the Body of Christ.*

With the growing distrust of the modern worldview and its emphasis on the autonomy of human reason and its rampant individualism, evangelicals are rediscovering the central importance of the church in the New Testament as the sphere within which the Holy Spirit works to build believers up to maturity. The church is made into a *koinonia* or living fellowship through the Holy Spirit, and is God's ordained agent for fulfilling God's mission in the world. Postmodernity highlights the importance of the community life available in the church as God's focal point for providing Christian identity, fellowship, appropriate support and equipping for service and for worshipping God. Theological colleges, particularly interdenominational ones, have a significant role in modeling their theological and practical dependence upon the church for ongoing effectiveness. Postmodernity fosters two attitudes that are in potential conflict. On the one hand it stresses the essential need for community, relationships and inter-personal support to give identity, a sense of purpose and fulfillment for humans. On the other hand it accepts and encourages a lack of commitment to institutions, exalting the freedom and independence of individuals from any overarching authority structures. Our challenge is to demonstrate a biblical understanding both of the importance of the community life and fellowship available only through participation in a church fellowship, and of cultivating and sustaining commitment to those church structures that God the Spirit provides as means of grace for Christian sustenance. Evangelical theologians are drawing attention to the importance of church as community to meet the needs of postmoderns.<sup>23</sup>

*For Our Mission – Conversion not Proselytism; by Word, Deed, Sign and Life; Transforming our Societies in Deep Mission, and Making Global Mission Integral to Local Church Life.*

As for Christian initiation, so for mission. The believer and the church are both totally dependent upon God the Holy Spirit to fulfill their God-given mission in the world, or more accurately, to participate obediently in God's mission in the world. Space forbids any adequate dealing with the centrality of Spirit-directed mission for working out an evangelical identity today. But each phrase in the heading of this sub-section draws attention to significant issues in present-day mission. From the Spirit's direction of the Jerusalem

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Grenz, 'Articulating the Christian Belief Mosaic . . .', in *Evangelical Futures..*, 2000, 131-133.

Council to accept peoples of other cultures into the church on the basis of conversion alone, and not proselytism, the process of mission has been established for all time (Acts 15). That decision obligates the church to grapple with all the issues relating to Bible translation, cultural transformation, and contextualization of the gospel message.<sup>24</sup> Evangelical commitment to the Scriptures and the gospel puts evangelicals at the forefront of addressing these issues. Increasingly evangelicals see mission as an incarnational, wholistic task. In mission we must hold together the testimony of holy living, the proclamation of the unchanging Word of God, the offering of sensitive, costly service and social action with an expectant reliance upon the Holy Spirit to give evidence of his gracious, powerful working with and through us as his church. Such full-orbed mission works not only for personal transformation, but also to bring the structures of the culture and society under the active lordship of Jesus Christ so that worldviews are transformed and the forces of evil confronted in his powerful name.

Being an evangelical today means humbly enjoying the wonder, expressing the gratitude, and accepting and exploring the life-changing implications of coming into a vital relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Conserving the spontaneity and purity of that relationship and declaring these truths upon which it depends are, for the evangelical, the highest of all honours.

### **Engaging our Changed Context**

From the foregoing one central reality has become evident against which we must work out what it means to be an evangelical today. That reality is the demise of the old context which was formerly essential to evangelical self-definition. There is no longer any nominally Christian society that can rightly be called Christendom. Moreover, the old Enlightenment backdrop is also being steadily dismantled. So the issue confronting evangelicalism today is how to define itself without those backdrops. We have repeatedly suggested aspects of what the new postmodern context requires. We now have to define ourselves, in the West particularly, against this new postmodern, post-Christendom background, and that means a fresh approach. Middleton and Walsh summarize well the challenge before us:

Just as Israel after exile could not go back to its prior life in the land, to the status quo of the temple, monarchy and guaranteed security, so we are not

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24 On the significance of the Jerusalem Council decision for mission see Andrew F. Walls, 'Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies', *IBMR*, Oct 1997, 146-153.

looking for a naïve return to some modern or pre-modern Christian ideal. Neither a Dionysian embrace of chaos nor a fearful imposition of a prior orientation will do. We need to come through our disorientation to a reorientation, a return to our biblical roots, that propels us forward to grapple with life in a postmodern culture. Rejecting both postmodern abandonment and a myopic conservative retrenchment, we desire what Paul Ricoeur called a 'second naivete', a renewed encounter with the historic Christian faith that takes seriously where we have come historically. It is only this sort of reorientation that will be able to provide us with genuine hope and critical guidance as we move into the twenty-first century.<sup>25</sup>

We can suggest the way forward and sketch the implications of what we have found in this study in the following comments:

*The Demise of Christendom Demands a Definitional Reorientation for Evangelicalism*

We need to work now to define ourselves as evangelicals positively, not negatively. We must cultivate the ability to explain what we are for, rather than what we stand against. Contrasts, when they are needed, should be against the context of the society and world in which we live and work, rather than against other sections of the Christian church. This may well mean we can now be open to new relationships with other fellow Christians – whatever label our habits from the past may dispose us to give them – Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Post-Liberals, etc. Various recent evangelical writers make pleas for exploring such new relationships.<sup>26</sup>

We need to develop our evangelical ability to interact creatively with other viewpoints and at the same time loyally to expound our own evangelical heritage. Part of the contemporary challenge is to continue to speak positively and discerningly into the broad range of theological issues of our day. This means sharpening our ability to listen and learn from those with whom we disagree theologically, and responding to them creatively from a consistently evangelical perspective. We see good evidence of this happening, in, for example, the symposium edited by Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*.<sup>27</sup> Or again in Stanley Grenz and Kevin Vanhoozer's contributions in the Regent College 1999 Theology Conference volume, *Evangelical*

25 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*. . . , 173.

26 Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center* . . . 2000, 346-351; Donald Bloesch, *Evangelical Essentials, Vol II*, 278-283.

27 Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP 1996.

*Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method.*<sup>28</sup>

But in this interaction, as John Stackhouse reminds us, part of the challenge is not merely to interact by responding to the viewpoints and emphases presented by others, but loyally to present our evangelical distinctives in the process.<sup>29</sup> It is one thing to respond to the agenda set by other groups. It is quite another to take initiatives in raising and addressing current issues from our own theological stance. Our history as a protest movement leaves us prone to being reactive rather than proactive. But the challenge of the hour is to produce evangelical theological leadership that sets the wider agenda and determines the direction of global theological debate.

We shall henceforth keep clear of territorial definitions of evangelical Christianity – always using definitions that embrace the Third-world majority.

*The Transition from Modernity to Postmodernity Demands Re-contextualization*

As we have seen from our use of some of Andrew Walls' insights, evangelicalism has always been involved in the task of contextualizing the living message of the Gospel into the particular contexts in which the church lives out its mission. We have found two obvious implications in this for today:

We need a new approach to apologetics. The old rationalistic evidentialism that has characterized Western apologetics for many years now needs to be transformed into an approach suited to the post-modern context. We have allowed the rationalistic presuppositions of the Enlightenment plausibility structures to shape our apologetic approach and agenda. So we have sought to use reason as a precursor for faith – and even as an attempted basis for verifying revelation. Middleton and Walsh point the way to a fresh apologetic approach when they call for 'prophecy, visions and dreams' to accompany the living out of the biblical narrative and its drama in our own context.<sup>30</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, likewise, has laid down the ground rules for developing an apologetic in which the Gospel itself, rather than the assumptions of the post-Christian context, should determine the apologetic approach as well as its content.<sup>31</sup> An important antipodean approach to one aspect of this new apologetic task is offered by Ross

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28 John G. Stackhouse, Jr (ed), *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000.

29 John Stackhouse, Jr, 'Evangelical Theology should be Evangelical', in *Ibid*, 39-58.

30 Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger*. . . , 190-195.

31 See, e.g., Lesslie Newbigin, 'Can the West be Converted?', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*



Clifford and Philip Johnstone, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age*, in which they grapple with the burgeoning new spiritualities of post-modernity.<sup>32</sup>

We need to be open to new and flexible priorities and ways of contributing into various discourses – in theology, the social sciences, education, and public policy, etc. The challenge is to supplement our evangelistic involvement with deeper involvement in the real issues of our society with a fresh resolve to become part of cutting edge solutions. We have been better known publicly for making moral judgments from the side-lines than as integral players at the forefront of change and resolution in areas of dysfunctional family life, law and order, education, or domestic and industrial relationship breakdown, to mention but a few areas crying out for creative input in our nation. Significant contributions are under way in some areas both from current teaching staff and some graduates of our evangelical theological colleges. We could cite significant input into public planning in the social justice arena; contributions to the international discussion of the uniqueness of Christ in the interface between different religions; or of leadership in think-tanks and lobby groups addressing educational, societal and economic issues. If the evangelical distinctive of Christ's lordship over all of life is to mean anything in this new millennium then we need to embrace, support, encourage and equip one another for much more theological and practical involvement in such aspects of social and communal life.

*The Pervasive Post-Christian Context Demands Recovery of the Centrality of Mission*

We have already noted the traditional distinctive of evangelical activism directed to both evangelism and social justice causes. This needs to be kept even more clearly in focus in the West today.

We face a new phase in mission history. As Harold W. Turner put it:

There is no precedent for such a mission, a mission to a major culture that thought it had been converted when it hadn't, and then publicly discarded the Christian faith. Under God we face a wholly new mission task. This is the first feature of our New Zealand situation, as sharers in Western culture. Let us face it.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Ross Clifford and Philip Johnstone, *Jesus and the Gods of the New Age: Communicating Christ in Today's Spiritual Supermarket*, Oxford: Lion, 2001.

33 Harold W. Turner, 'The Gospel's Mission to Culture in New Zealand', *Journeyings*, October 1991, 3-17. We would note, however, that some aspects of this situation are very similar to the mission challenge taken up by the Anabaptists, the Puritans, and the Pietists following the Reformation. The public rejection of Christianity in the current situation is the distinctly new feature.

We shall seek to ensure the centrality of mission becomes the basis for clarifying purpose and priorities within evangelicalism. We can do no better than to quote Stanley Grenz to make this point and to fittingly conclude our paper:

As has been noted repeatedly . . . to be 'evangelical' means to be centered on the gospel. Consequently, evangelicals are a gospel people. They are a people committed to hearing, living out, and sharing the good news of God's saving action in Jesus Christ and the divine gift of the Holy Spirit, a saving action that brings forgiveness, transforms life, and creates a new community. As a gospel people, evangelicals continually set forth the truth that the center of the church is the gospel and that the church, therefore, must be gospel centered.<sup>34</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As evangelicals today we stand at a cross-roads. We have a rich heritage, developed within a particular historical setting over an extended time period, and exported to and now well rooted in a diversity of cultural soils globally. Our challenge is to grasp firmly the rich heritage and apply it afresh in our now significantly different cultural, societal and worldview setting. The Gospel is still the power of God bringing salvation for every one who believes. The question is, are we loyal and adaptable enough to excite a new generation of students and equip another generation of theological educators with a vital commitment to this gospel as the heart of their lives and service?

### **Abstract**

In the second part of this article the author summarises what he sees as the core beliefs of evangelicalism and their significance for the movement, and then considers how we are to engage with the changed context in which we live, characterised as it is by the demise of Christendom, the rise of post-modernity and the post-Christian nature of society.

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34 Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center* . . . 2000, 337. Please also recall our footnote 16 above.