DIE BEGRENZTE GEMEINSCHAFT ("THE BOUNDARIED PEOPLE") AND THE CHARACTER OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

STANLEY J. GRENZ*

In 1997 Jon Stone concluded that neo-evangelicalism is "captivated by the issue of defining its boundaries." In support of his claim, Stone cites the "flood of books and articles" that has flowed from evangelical pens since World War II. In his estimation, this phenomenon "documents a sustained effort at defining the limits of evangelicalism by affirming and reaffirming its boundary differences with both liberalism and fundamentalism."[1] As Stone's comment indicates, the tendency to delineate boundaries has been part of post-fundamentalist neo-evangelicalism since its inception in the 1940s. Yet in recent years, this concern appears to have taken on a new intensity, as evangelical theologians have begun to debate among themselves the question as to just how encompassing the evangelical "big tent" can be.

The current quest for boundaries carries potentially crucial ramifications for evangelical theology. The goal of this essay is to explore the implications of the phenomenon of boundary-setting for the shape of evangelical theology in the postmodern context. To this end, I first look at the concept of boundaries itself. I then turn to the question of the nature of evangelicalism as a boundaried people. Finally, I apply the results of my study to the question of the role of evangelical theology within evangelicalism as well as to what I see as the nature of the Evangelical Theological Society.

I. THE QUEST FOR BOUNDARIES

Simply defined, a boundary is "anything forming or serving to indicate a limit or end."[2] Viewed from this perspective, boundaries are an inevitable part of life. They are present everywhere, even when the demarcated limits are fuzzy or difficult to decipher. Hence, religious groups are likewise marked by boundaries, despite the current trend to highlight the fluidity of the lines running between them. As Stephen W. Sykes notes, "The fact that

---

* Stanley Grenz is professor of theology and ethics at Carey/Regent College, 5920 Iona Drive, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1J6.

[1] Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997) 179.

[2] *The Doubleday Dictionary for Home, School, and Office* (ed. Sidney I. Landau and Ronald J. Bogus; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 84.

the boundaries of a religion may be difficult to determine with precision does not mean that a religion has no boundaries."[3]

1. *Boundaries in the Bible.*   The concept of boundaries runs through the Bible. The idea is especially prevalent in the OT, where the term is closely tied to actual physical demarcations. So important were boundaries in the ancient Near East that special stones were erected to rim political or economic domains. These markers delimited national frontiers and property lines.

The ancient Israelites considered boundaries to be of divine origin. God was responsible for setting boundaries throughout creation (Ps 74:17, cf. Gen 1:4–8; Ps 104:9; Jer 5:22). He had likewise determined the habitations of the nations (Deut 32:8; Acts 17:26), including Israel (Exod 23:31; Num 34:1–15). For this reason, Isaiah could cite the overrunning of national boundaries inherent in military conquest as one of the sins of the king of Assyria (Isa 10:13).

Upon their entrance into the promised land, God determined the borders of each of the tribes of Israel (e.g. Josh 22:25), and he apportioned the inheritance of the various clans within the tribes, accomplishing this task through appointed leaders (Num 34:16–29) or the practice of casting lots (Num 34:13; Josh 14:2). Because these apportionments were believed to carry divine sanction, the stones that the ancient leaders had set in place to demarcate property boundaries were not to be altered (Deut 19:14; 27:17; Prov 15:25; 22:28; 23:10), and moving an ancient boundary stone came be seen as a sign of great wickedness (Job 24:2; Hos 5:10).

The boundary did not only mark the limit of a domain; it stood as well for the territory itself. This is evident in the use of the Hebrew term *gebul*, which can signify both the actual boundary or the territory thus bounded. Moreover, each geographic or tribal territory, together with its boundaries, carried religious significance. Each was connected to a particular deity that was to be worshiped by the inhabitants within that domain. Magnus Ottosson notes the importance of this concept for the religious self-conception of the Hebrew people: "The frequent use of the expression *gebhul yisra'el*, 'the territory of Israel,' points to a conscious, most likely religious understanding of the boundary of the national territory whose Lord and God is Yahweh."[4]

The connection between a bounded territory and a corresponding deity points to a deeper sense of boundary present among the ancient Hebrews. The OT writers speak of Israel as a particular people, a people who are distinct from the nations. Hence, they viewed Israel as what we might call a *begrenzte Gemeinschaft*, a "boundaried" people.

The genesis of Israel's awareness of their special boundaried status lay in their conviction that as a nation they were God's covenant partner. In fact, the sense of boundary is inherent in the Hebrew term *berith*, insofar as

---

[3] Stephen W. Sykes, "Heresy," in *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 249.

[4] Magnus Ottosson, "*gebhul*," *TDOT* 2.366.

a covenant—which indicates a "binding relationship"[5]—is by its very nature limited to those whom it brings together within the bond that it forges. This is the case, even if the relationship is that of a vassal to a suzerain, which provided one of several prominent ancient Near Eastern practices that gave rise to the Hebrew concept.[6] Although covenants were a part of life in the ancient world, the idea that a people could be the covenant partner of their god, together with the relational exclusivity inherent in this idea, appears to have been unique to Israel. As Bernhard Anderson concludes, "Covenant expresses a novel element of the religion of ancient Israel: the people are bound in relationship to the one God, Yahweh, who makes an exclusive ('jealous') claim upon their loyalty in worship and social life."[7] Weinfeld adds that Israel viewed the covenant to be so exclusive so as "to preclude the possibility of dual or multiple loyalties such as were permitted in other religions."[8] On this basis, then, the ancient Hebrews came to see themselves as a boundaried people in a unique, even exclusive, sense.

The prophets understood the covenant between God and Israel to be the result of a particular historical act, the act of election, which they saw as having occurred at a specific point in time. At a particular juncture of their historical journey, God had elected Israel to be his covenant partner, and the nation, in turn, had elected God. Above all, the OT writers spoke of God's electing act as having occurred in the exodus, which in turn came as the fulfillment of his prior pledge to Abraham (Deut 7:6–8). Johannes Behm succinctly summarizes the point. Israel's concept of election, he writes, "implies with utmost clarity that we are not dealing with a mere idea of God but with an act of God in the remote past. God's will elected the children of Israel, who then for their part elected God."[9]

The exclusivity of Israel's sense of being a boundaried people was tempered, however, by two additional, related aspects of the OT covenantal idea. The first was the acknowledgment of a universal *extent* of God's covenanting action that formed the wider context in which his special relationship with Israel stood. Long before the establishment of Israel, God had entered into covenant with humankind and even with all creation, first in Adam and later in Noah. Bernhard Anderson notes that the latter covenant "assures God's faithful pledge to humanity, to nonhuman creatures, and to the earth itself."[10]

Israel's sense of exclusivity was tempered as well by a realization of the universal *intent* of the covenant. The ancient Hebrew prophets came to see that the goal of the special covenant Israel enjoyed with God was not that of creating a boundaried people as such. Rather, God's purpose was that his elect people be a means through which God could bless all humankind.

---

[5] Bernhard W. Anderson, "Covenant," in *Oxford Companion to the Bible* (ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 138.

[6] M. Weinfeld, "*berith*," *TDOT* 2.266–69.

[7] Anderson, "Covenant" 138.

[8] Weinfeld, "*berith*" 278.

[9] Johannes Behm, "*diathēkē*," *TDNT* 2.120.

[10] Anderson, "Covenant" 138.

Israel, in short, had been elected for the sake of the nations. This idea was articulated in the narrative of the call of Abraham. God chose the patriarch to be the father of one particular nation, so that through him "all peoples on earth" could be blessed (Gen 12:3). In keeping with this promise, Isaiah could speak of God's servant as anointed by the divine Spirit to "bring justice to the nations" (Isa 41:2).

Horst Seebass claims that the concept of the election of the part for the sake of the whole is inherent in the root Hebrew term *bachar* ("choose") itself. "Everywhere that *bhr* occurs in relationship to persons," Seebass writes, "it denotes choice out of a group (generally out of the totality of the people), so that the chosen one discharges a function in relationship to the group. Thus throughout, *bhr* includes the idea of separating, but in the sense that the one separated by *bhr*, 'choosing, selection,' stood that much more clearly in the service of the whole." Seebass then applies this observation specifically to the election of Israel: "The horizon of the election of the people of Israel is the peoples of the world, in relationship to which as a whole the 'individual' Israel was chosen."[11]

Wolfhart Pannenberg connects the concept of election for the sake of the world to the overarching intention of the divine love for humankind: "The particularism of the love of God for the elected one is to be related to the more comprehensive horizon of God's love for all mankind. The chosen one, then, is assigned to serve as God's agent in relation to a more comprehensive object of God's love. Therefore the chosen one belongs to God precisely in serving God's greater purpose in the world."[12] Schrenk, in turn, points out that the Christological impulse led the early Christians to apply the OT principle to the church: "Against the historical background of later Judaism, with its nationalistic pride in election and its sectarian restriction, primitive Christianity gives a wholly new turn to the concept on the basis of Christ Himself. It has in view the election of a universal community in which there is no place for the developments mentioned." Schrenk then adds, "The truth that election does not aim at the preferential treatment of one part of the race involves the further positive truth that the community as a whole is elected for the whole of the human race. It is commissioned to fulfill eschatological and teleological tasks in the service of the divine overruling."[13]

This aspect of the biblical concept of election suggests that the ultimate goal of God's constituting of a boundaried people is not to exclude but to include. In fact, rather than being established with the intent of keeping others out, boundaries are meant to be crossed. And this crossing of the boundaries is to run in both directions. The mandate of the boundaried community is to reach out beyond the border that delimits its identity. But the goal of such outreach includes that of drawing others into its ongoing mission to the world.

---

[11] Horst Seebass, *"bachar," TDOT* 2.82–83.

[12] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Human Nature, Election, and History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 49.

[13] G. Schrenk, *"eklektos," TDNT* 4.192.

Although the NT writers carried to new heights the sense of election for
the sake of the whole that they inherited from their OT predecessors, the
early Christian community—like Israel—did not obliterate the boundary
that separated it from the wider mass of humankind. On the contrary, the
early church seems also to have been stamped by a heightened sense of its
own distinctive character as a boundaried people. This is evident, for ex-
ample, in the differentiation made in the NT between the domain of God
and the realm of Satan. The Scriptural writers spoke of believers as those
whom God had "rescued . . . from the dominion of darkness and brought . . .
into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Col 1:15).

The division of reality into two realms provided an ontological basis for
the theological understanding of the act of excommunication that emerged
in the early church. Although Jesus' instructions in Matthew's Gospel re-
garding church discipline carry overtones of the Jewish assumption of the
centrality of a boundary dividing Israel and the Gentiles (Matt 18:17), Paul
conceives of excommunication as entailing the act of handing offending per-
sons over to Satan (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20). In commenting on Paul's com-
mand to the Corinthian church to take action against a blatant sinner in
their community, Gordon Fee asserts that "the language means to turn him
back out into Satan's sphere." Fee then explains: "In contrast to the gath-
ered community of believers . . . this man is to be turned back out into the
world, where Satan and his 'principalities and powers' still hold sway over
people's lives to destroy them."[14] J. N. D. Kelly offers a similar perspective
on the Pauline statement regarding the action taken against Hymenaeus
and Alexander. Kelly claims that the language connotes "the expulsion of
the sinner from the church, the realm of God's care and protection, and the
formal handing of him over to the power of Satan." Kelly then links this act
to an underlying understanding regarding the distinction between the
church and the world as actual realms: "To the mind of the primitive
Church this did not simply mean that he left the Christian congregation
and resumed a peaceful life in pagan society; such a man was thought to be
really exposed to the malice of the Evil One."[15]

The sense within the early church that believers constituted a bound-
aried people led as well to the development of the concept of heresy. Unlike
the connotations with which it later came to be imbued, in the Hellenistic
world the term *hairesis* did not yet carry the judgmental tone later associ-
ated with it. Rather it could simply refer to "doctrine" or to a philosophical
"school," and hence to "the teaching of a particular school of philosophy."[16]
This more neutral use of the term is evident in the NT in the book of Acts.
Here *hairesis* denotes a school of thought or a sect, such as the Sadducees
(Acts 5:17) or the Pharisees (Acts 15:5; 26:5). Even the Nazarenes (i.e.

[14] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,
1987) 209.

[15] J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles: Timothy I & II, Titus* (HNTC; San
Francisco: Harper and Row, 1960) 58.

[16] Schlier, "*hairesis*," *TDNT* 1.181.

Christians) could be designated a *hairesis* (Acts 24:5,14; 28:22). Paul, however, seems to have preferred to speak of the Christian community as "the Way" (Acts 24:14), perhaps because he wanted to reserve *hairesis* to refer to erring factions within the church (1 Cor 11:19; Gal 5:20). In keeping with this change in meaning, a heretic came to be seen as a divisive or factious person (Titus 3:10), and later the term came to include the idea of holding to false doctrine (2 Pet 2:1), which meaning has predominated in the Christian tradition. Bruce Demarest reflects the dominate understanding when he declares that heresy "connotes doctrinal deviation from the fundamental truths taught by Scripture and the orthodox Christian church, and active propagation of the same."[17]

2. *The concept of boundaries and the postmodern turn.* In a manner somewhat similar to its OT counterpart, the early church conceived of itself as a boundaried community. But the question remains as to the type of boundary that demarcates the church from the world in general and the character of evangelicalism as a boundaried people in particular. Our attempt to find a way through this issue can be abetted by a cursory look at certain contemporary understandings of the nature of group boundaries.

In recent years, certain Christian missiologists have drawn insight from set theory in their explorations of evangelism and missions theory. Paul Hiebert, to cite one prominent example, points out that people in the West generally think in terms of a particular class of "bounded sets" or, to use the more precise designator that dates to the German mathematician Georg Cantor, "intrinsic well-formed sets."[18] A bounded set is "intrinsic" in that it is formed on the basis of the supposed essential nature of its members. To say that such a set is "well-formed" means that it sports a clear demarcation between items that belong to the set and those that do not. In short, bounded sets are circumscribed by a boundary designed to include some things and exclude others. According to Hiebert, because we cannot see into human hearts, viewing the category *Christian* as a bounded set launches us on a quest to determine which beliefs and practices identify persons as Christians and separate them from non-Christians. It leads as well to a keen desire to differentiate clearly between persons who are Christians and those who are not, doing so on the basis of outward manifestations such as adherence to certain beliefs and conformity to certain practices. As a result, he concludes, determining whether a person stands inside or outside the boundary emerges as the chief consideration in every situation.[19]

In contrast to this typically Western approach, Hiebert proposes an alternative that draws from another way of speaking about groups and membership in a group, namely, the concept of a centered, or "extrinsic

---

[17] Bruce A. Demarest, "Heresy," *New Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988) 291–92.

[18] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 113.

[19] Ibid. 115.

well-formed," set. Rather than being based on some supposed essential nature that constitutes items as members of a set, membership in an extrinsic set is predicated upon relationality, whether this be the relationship of the items to each other or, preferably for Hiebert, their relationship to a common reference point. Hence, things that are related to the center in a particular manner—or are related to each other in a common field—may be said to belong to the set, whereas those not related in this manner cannot be so designated. In Hiebert's estimation, viewing the category *Christian* as a centered set shifts the focus away from attempts to define the church by appeal to its boundaries. Rather the emphasis is on Christ as the defining center of the church, and the church is seen as a people gathered around— or in relationship to—Christ.[20]

Hiebert's appropriation of set theory resonates with certain recent developments in cultural anthropology.[21] The modern understanding, which emerged after the 1920s, viewed culture as the entire manner in which a particular people live and, by extension, as a kind of glue that binds individuals to society. Hence, in 1948 Melvin Herskovitz, to cite one example, described culture as "the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people."[22] Modern anthropologists, in turn, saw as their task that of exploring the specific pattern of behaviors that distinguishes any given society from all others.[23] Viewed from this perspective, a society becomes a quasi-bounded set consisting of all those persons who are intrinsically members of that society evidenced by the fact that they display the particular behavior patterns indicative of the group.

Beginning in the 1980s, the modern approach came under attack. Since then, postmodern cultural anthropologists have tended to treat culture "as that which *agg*regates people and processes, rather than *in*tegrates them," to cite Anthony B. Cohen's description. In typical postmodern fashion, current characterizations of culture, such as Cohen's, elevate difference, rather than similarity, among people.[24] Although postmodern anthropologists continue to consider cultures as wholes, they view these wholes not as monolithic, but as internally fissured.[25] The elevation of difference has also triggered a heightened awareness that culture is the product of social interaction, and hence that people are active creators, rather than passive receivers, of culture.[26] Moreover, such social interaction entails an ongoing

[20] Ibid. 127.

[21] For a more complete delineation of the following material, see Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 130–47.

[22] Melvin Herskovitz, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948) 625.

[23] See, for example, John W. Bennett and Melvin M. Tumin, *Social Life* (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1948) 208–9.

[24] Anthony P. Cohen, *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994) 118–19.

[25] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997) 56.

[26] Cohen, *Self Consciousness* 118–19.

conversation regarding the meaning of the public symbols that participants in a particular society share. Hence, Alaine Touraine concludes that, rather than a clearly understood body of beliefs and values or a dominant ideology, what binds people together is "a set of resources and models that social actors seek to manage, to control, and which they appropriate or whose transformation into social organization they negotiate among themselves."[27]

The insights of postmodern cultural anthropology foster a conception of society that resembles to some extent a centered set. Viewed from this perspective, a society is defined by the common set of symbols standing at its center and by the ongoing participation of its members in the task of determining the meaning of the symbols to which they are all related.

II. BOUNDARIES AND THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENT

In keeping with the legacy of the Biblical communities of faith, Christians have always viewed themselves as comprising a boundaried people in some sense of the term. But how ought this to be understood? Or, posing the question in a manner more germane to the central task of this essay, in what sense can evangelicalism be described as boundaried?

Some theologians would argue that the answer to both questions is essentially the same. Both the church in general and evangelicals in particular form a boundaried people simply because they comprise a bounded set. The tendency to see evangelicalism as a bounded set has been especially prominent among post-fundamentalist neo-evangelicals. The concern for boundaries that emerged among evangelicals since the 1940s was to a large degree ignited by a crucial goal that sparked the emergence of the coalition out of the ashes of fundamentalism. As the Jon Stone quotation with which I began implies, the neo-evangelical leaders saw themselves as providing a third way standing between a callus fundamentalism on the one hand and a bankrupt liberalism on the other. Despite this common *raison d'être*, evangelicals have not always agreed on the propriety of attempting to delineate the movement by appeal to its supposed defining boundaries. Some have raised the question as to whether the *sine qua non* of evangelicalism properly lies in any purported demarcating boundary whatsoever. Stating the question at issue in terms of set theory: Is the evangelical movement a bounded set? Or does its character require a quite different understanding of the manner in which evangelicals may be seen as a boundaried people?

1. *Is evangelicalism a boundaried community?* Many contemporary evangelicals not only view as self-evident the assumption that the movement is a bounded set, but are convinced that evangelicalism's demarcating boundary is ultimately doctrinal in character. In their estimation, persons are deemed to be evangelical if they acknowledge a particular set of doc-

---

[27] Alaine Touraine, *Return of the Actor* (trans. Myrna Godzich; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) 8, 26–27, 54–55.

trines, which taken together are seen as comprising "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

To cite one example, in the closing paragraphs of his little diatribe, *The Evangelical Left* (1997), Millard Erickson seems to assume that evangelicalism is a bounded set and that its boundaries are theological. In a veiled response to a rhetorical remark made by Clark Pinnock in his book *A Wideness in God's Mercy*,[28] Erickson raises the matter of the boundaries of evangelicalism. Referring to what he fears as the doctrinal slippage of certain evangelical theologians, he raises the question as to "how far one may move, or how many times one may halve the distance between things, and still claim to be within the original group."[29] In hinting at his own position on the matter, Erickson follows up his query with a folksy illustration. Just how gooselike can a duck become, he asks, and still remain a duck? Erickson then concludes his musings with a veiled warning: "there must come some point where the line has been crossed."[30]

Some Christian traditions forthrightly claim that the true church is creedally defined and hence doctrinally bounded. Even certain Protestant denominations have at some point or another in their historical trajectory devised doctrinal standards as tests of fellowship and then put themselves forward as the only faithful guardians of true orthodoxy. Nevertheless, recent applications of set theory to the question of the character of the church as a boundaried people, such as Hiebert proposed, together with postmodern insights into the nature of societies suggest that evangelicalism ought not to be understood as a bounded set, despite the widespread influence of this outlook.

Regardless of whether or not doctrine may be viewed as a *sine qua non* of the church, seeking to define evangelicalism creedally runs counter to what has been the evangelical vision from the inception of the movement.[31] Like their Puritan and Pietist forebears, and even the Reformers themselves, the leaders of the early eighteenth-century evangelical awakening did not intend to launch a new ecclesiastical structure or to recreate the true church in the face of a perceived condition of total apostasy. Following in the wake of the Reformers' concern for a gospel (i.e. an "evangelical") church, the early evangelicals purposed to renew the church from within by fostering a rebirth of what Donald Dayton has aptly termed "convertive piety."[32] For this reason, whatever organizational expression the evangelical

[28] Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 163.

[29] Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 146.

[30] Ibid. 147.

[31] For a similar explication of the point made in the following paragraphs, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 175–81.

[32] For this designation, see Donald W. Dayton, "The Limits of Evangelicalism," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (ed. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 48.

movement later came to adopt quite naturally wore a para-church face. Many evangelical institutions composed doctrinal statements, to be sure. Yet such documents were not meant to function as confessions of the faith of the participants in the cause (and less so as creeds to which all Christians must adhere), but as the basis for cooperative engagement of concerned believers across confessional lines. The founders of such institutions appear to have sensed that the task of confessing the faith of the church lay with the church itself and not with a loose coalition of Christians who joined together in the various tasks that they associated with the program of renewal. Therefore, the attempt to treat evangelicalism as a bounded set by erecting a theological boundary for the movement as a whole is theologically problematic, for it in effect transforms what was meant to be a loosely-tied, trans-confessional renewal movement into a particular confessional tradition, that is, to make the para-church into the church.

Furthermore, the attempt to set a doctrinal boundary around evangelicalism negates the central insight of the movement and hence its central contribution to the church that evangelicals all desire to renew. From its inception, evangelicalism has existed as a protest movement. The early evangelicals knew from personal experience that adherence to doctrinal standards cannot guarantee the presence of what they believe to be true Christian faith, namely, a heart converted to God and to others. They saw vividly demonstrated in their day the truth of Jesus' critique of his opponents, when in recalling the words that God had spoken through Isaiah, he declared, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6). In keeping with this insight, evangelicals have continually cautioned against the tendency to equate being a Christian with mere external matters, such as participating in the sacraments and reciting the creed. Being a Christian, they declare, cuts to the heart, for the gospel is a message of inward transformation that leads, in turn, to a life of devotion and discipleship. Of course, right doctrine has a role to play in the transformation of heart and life. Nevertheless, evangelicals have always been adamant in asserting that doctrinal orthodoxy is never an end in itself, but is important insofar as it plays a role in inaugurating and nurturing true Christian piety. In other words, evangelicals are constantly vigilant lest mere *assensus* (assent) displace *fiducia* (saving trust). J. I. Packer reflected this aspect of the evangelical emphasis when he noted recently, "What brings salvation, after all, is not any theory about faith in Christ, justification, and the church, but faith itself in Christ himself."[33]

Equating "evangelical" with a particular set of doctrines also risks contradicting the generous theological spirit that lies at the heart of evangelicalism. Although they did not always live up to their ideals, eighteenth-century evangelicals had a deeply-felt awareness of their own limitations in seeing clearly and knowing the truth completely. Following their lead, the truly evangelical spirit acknowledges that doctrinal formulae will always have a type of provisionality to them until the day when seeing "but a poor

---

[33] J. I. Packer, "Why I Signed It," *Christianity Today* 38/14 (December 12, 1994) 37.

reflection as in a mirror" and knowing "in part" give way to seeing "face to face" and knowing "fully" (1 Cor 13:12 NIV). Christian history, from the Inquisition through the persecution of the Anabaptists to the mistreatment of the Remonstrants, indicates that genuine theological humility is all too often the first casualty in the fervent defense of doctrinal conformity. Unfortunately, theologians who set up a particular set of doctrines as the boundary markers of evangelicalism tend to claim that their own particular theological perspective comprises the essence of evangelical orthodoxy and as a result all-to-readily fall into the temptation of elevating their particular doctrinal system as the standard for evangelical belief. Moreover, evangelical boundary-keepers routinely set up a one-dimensional theological continuum complete with "safe" boundaries, then proceed to characterize those who differ with them regarding certain points of doctrine as standing "partway between the evangelical view and some nonevangelical position," to cite Erickson's characterization of what he deems to be representatives of "the evangelical left."[34]

Although evangelicalism itself cannot be described by appeal to a theological boundary after the fashion of a bounded set, in one sense its nature as a renewal movement readily fosters viewing the *church* in a bounded-set manner. In apparent contrast to the early Reformers whose conception of the true church as marked by word and sacrament seems to reflect a centered-set understanding, the evangelical focus on convertive piety suggests that the boundaries of the church are circumscribed by the experience of the new birth. When viewed through evangelical eyes, the church appears to be a bounded set, insofar as the reality of being born of the Spirit comprises the essential nature of everyone who truly belongs to the community of faith. In this manner, the new birth emerges as the boundary marker of the ecclesial community and the "ancient landmark" that, evangelicals declare, dare not be moved.

In contrast to this possible evangelical perception of the nature of the church, as a renewal movement within the church evangelicalism itself cannot be characterized in a bounded-set manner. Evangelicals are, to be sure, united by their common conversion experience. Yet rather than constituting evangelical Christians in themselves as a bounded set, the new birth is what brings all believers together within the church, according to evangelical theology. Hence, this essential characteristic—being born again—which all Christians share and which separates Christians from the rest of humankind, is not what constitutes one particular group of believers as participants in the evangelical movement. Rather, such participation is predicated by an acceptance of the common task that forms the center of the evangelical coalition, namely, the mission of propagating the gospel of transformation and of renewing the church.

The orientation toward a common calling accounts in part for the theological breadth that the evangelical trajectory has encompassed from its inception. The concern for an awakening of convertive piety in the early

---

[34] Erickson, *Evangelical Left* 146.

eighteenth century resulted in a movement that embraced both George Whitefield and John Wesley; it included both Jonathan Edwards and Isaac Backus. Since then, the diversity within evangelicalism has increased, rather than decreased, as the movement has become a worldwide, multicultural phenomenon. Today the ranks of evangelical theologians in the USA have been augmented by African-American and Hispanic thinkers, and the global evangelical ethos is being affected by voices emerging from the burgeoning churches in Africa, South America, and Asia.[35] Moreover, Wesleyan,[36] holiness and Pentecostal[37]/charismatic[38] influences are now shaping evangelicalism to the extent that Joel Carpenter has hailed the beginning of "a new chapter of evangelical history, in which the pentecostal-charismatic movement is quickly supplanting the fundamentalist-conservative one as the most influential evangelical impulse at work today."[39] These seemingly disparate theological voices are not united by doctrinal uniformity, even though they do in fact share many common tenets. Rather, in keeping with the character of evangelicalism since the eighteenth century, they are committed to the task of propagating the gospel of the new birth, which is of course cradled in a particular theological context. The focus on a common endeavor suggests that the evangelical movement functions more like a centered set than a bounded set, and it resembles the social aggregate that postmodern cultural anthropologists describe.

2. *The boundaried character of evangelicalism*. These observations yield the conclusion that, when viewed from the evangelical theological perspective, the designation "boundaried people," understood in the narrow sense, must be reserved for the church, and, consequently, that it cannot properly be predicated of a renewal movement within the church. Nevertheless, the question still remains as to whether there might be some sense in which the descriptor could be applied to evangelicalism. To see how this may well be the case requires that we return to the aspects connected to the Biblical concept of being a boundaried people I cited earlier. That study

---

[35] For a helpful summary of some of these impulses, see William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). See also William A. Dyrness, ed., *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[36] See, for example, Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

[37] See, for example, Land's attempt at constructing "a more . . . theologically responsible Pentecostalism." Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). The work of Miroslav Volf ought to be cited here as well, although Volf appears to be moving away from his Pentecostal heritage. See, for example, Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[38] For an example, see J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988–1992).

[39] Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford, 1997) 237.

yielded the idea that, as a boundaried people, the community of faith enjoys a covenantal relationship to God, has been elected by God, and bears the task of excommunicating heretics from its midst.

Two of these characteristics—that of being a covenant, disciplining community—cannot easily be predicated of evangelicalism. The NT clearly portrays God's covenant people in this age as the church (e.g. 1 Pet 2:9–10). Evangelicals, in turn, might be seen as a people within the church who continuously call the church to understand rightly and take seriously its role as the covenant community. In this sense, the ongoing presence of evangelicals within the church stands as a persistent admonition to covenant renewal. Similarly, the prerogative of excommunication lies solely with the church, as is evident in both Jesus' teaching (Matt 18:17) and in Paul's instruction to the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 5:4–5). As proponents of renewal within the church evangelicals might well admonish the church to take its disciplinary task seriously. But because it is a coalition of Christians, and hence wears a para-church face, the evangelical movement itself cannot properly be viewed as the disciplinary body.[40]

The third concept, election, holds more promise. Evangelicals have generally not been adverse to viewing themselves as elect persons, at least not in the individualistic sense that typifies the Reformed tradition. Whatever may be said about the idea that "before the foundation of the world" God chose certain individuals for salvation,[41] election understood in this manner could only be appropriately predicated of the company that comprises the church. If evangelicals are among those destined to be saved, they belong to this blessed group by virtue of their connection to the church and not because they are evangelicals. Obviously, therefore, when I suggest that evangelicals may well be an elect people, I have another understanding of the term in view. More specifically, I am thinking of the biblical concept of the election of the part for the sake of the whole. Viewed from this perspective, evangelicals may readily see themselves as elect.

Even here, however, we must be cautious. Evangelicals are not a boundaried community in the sense of being elected as a people for the sake of the world. This, too, can only be predicated of the church itself. Evangelicals are not elect for the sake of the world by virtue of their status as evangelicals, but because they belong to the elect people of God, the church. Whatever aspect of election that could apply to evangelicals as a people and hence would constitute evangelicalism as a boundaried people must instead be connected to its role as a renewal movement within the church. The character of evangelicalism as a people committed to the gospel of transformation and to the propriety of convertive piety suggests that evangelicals comprise a specific part of the church that is elect for the sake of the renewal of the whole church. In short, evangelicals form a boundaried

---

[40] For a similar judgment, see Robert K. Johnston, "Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Problem for Modern Evangelicalism," *Evangelical Quarterly* 69/1 (1997) 35.

[41] For this description of election, see, for example, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 669.

people insofar as—or to the extent that—they serve as God's chosen instruments on behalf of the church, which alone comprises the truly elect of God in this age.

III. THEOLOGY WITHIN THE BOUNDARIED COMMUNITY

With this understanding of evangelicals as a boundaried people in view, we are now finally in a position to see the implications of our study of boundaries for evangelical theology.

In his description of the ramifications of viewing the church as a bounded set, Hiebert writes, "The church would view theology as ultimate, universal, and unchanging truth and define it in general propositional statements. It would divorce theology from the historical and cultural contexts in which it is formulated."[42] Although Hiebert's wholesale dismissal of this enterprise as a legitimate dimension of the church's theological task may well be somewhat overdrawn, his point is applicable, at least in part, in the task of understanding the true character of evangelical theology.

The variety of impulses and traditions that comprise the evangelical movement suggests that evangelicalism is a "big tent" that encompasses a wide diversity. It is a patchwork quilt of variegated subnarratives. Insofar as it is a blanket term for the theologies of a diverse group of ecclesial communities, para-church institutions and concerned individuals, evangelical theology is not a monolithic entity. Of course, the focus on convertive piety and the passion for renewal that evangelicals share give rise to certain concrete theological concerns, and these common features lead to an amazingly broad consensus among evangelicals on certain doctrines. Nevertheless, the amorphous character of the movement resists treating evangelicalism as a given, static reality that can be neatly summarized by a set of universally held doctrines and therefore can be invoked as marking its boundaries. In a sense, we might say that evangelical theology is a family of local theologies, none of which dare set itself up as the definitive standard for evangelical orthodoxy.

Hiebert's caution may be confirmed in another way as well. I noted earlier that the insights of postmodern cultural anthropology lead to a picture of a society as an aggregate of people engaged in an ongoing conversation regarding the meaning of shared public symbols with the goal of building a connotational consensus.[43] Viewed from this perspective, the church consists of a people who share a group of symbols that serve as both building blocks and conveyers of meaning. These symbols include a particular religious language, as well as specific images and rituals. Viewed from the perspective of postmodern cultural anthropology, the theological enterprise within the confessing community, the church, includes the delineation of "church dogmatics," to cite the title of Karl Barth's *magnum opus*. In fact, we might go so far as to claim that as church dogmatics, the task of theology

---

[42] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections* 116.
[43] Tanner, *Theories of Culture* 56.

includes the ongoing attempt to articulate—and thereby to defend—the Christian belief-mosaic, i.e. Christian orthodoxy, in the face of competing theological conceptions.

Although they share many symbols in common, Christians are not necessarily in agreement about the meaning these symbols are to convey. On the contrary, meaning-making is an ongoing task that involves lively conversation, intense discussion, and even heated debate among participants. Evangelicals join this larger conversation convinced that the process of meaning-making is best pursued when it is governed by certain formative commitments, at the heart of which is the belief that the Christian gospel is inherently transformative of heart and life, that is, that the gospel is convertive. Consequently, the task of pursuing orthodox doctrine is not incumbent on evangelical theologians as evangelicals. Nor do evangelical theologians busy themselves with the task of articulating in a systematic manner the Christian belief-mosaic because they are evangelicals. Rather, these efforts are predicated on their presence within the church, the confessing community, itself. Evangelical theologians, therefore, are church theologians who approach the theological task from a distinctive stance, at the heart of which is the commitment to convertive piety, and by taking seriously certain concerns that are largely the result of the evangelical vision of what it means to be the people of God. In this way, evangelical theology becomes a shared "research project." To borrow one feature from Imre Lakatos's description of the scientific enterprise,[44] evangelical theologians engage in the common Christian theological task of exploring and seeking to provide a cogent articulation of the Christian belief-mosaic guided by certain methodological rules.

One evangelical para-church institution that perhaps above all others has sought unabashedly to delimit the rules that ought to govern the evangelical theological enterprise and then to pursue the theological research project on the basis of these rules is the Evangelical Theological Society. Membership in this learned society is governed by two cardinal convictions, biblical inerrancy and the doctrine of the Trinity, as articulated in its doctrinal statement. At first glance, the requirement that members of the society sign the society's statement annually suggests that these two theological commitments comprise a theological boundary that constitutes the ETS as a bounded set. Yet the two affirmations carry a much deeper and more far-reaching function. Rather than being mere boundary markers, they comprise a shared center, two agreed-upon methodological rules that facilitate a common research project. By directing their efforts on the basis of this shared center, ETS members commit themselves to the task of engaging in the ongoing conversation about the meaning of the symbols of the Christian faith in a manner that draws from Scripture, read through the lens of a trinitarian hermeneutic, as their ultimate authoritive source.

---

[44] See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 132–33.

To summarize. A theology that is truly evangelical seeks to serve the boundaried people—the church of Jesus Christ—by engaging in the task of meaning-making on the basis of a commitment to the renewal of the church and the life-changing, transformative, convertive power of the gospel. Viewed from this perspective, we might go so far as to suggest that evangelical theologians are an elect people in a certain sense as well. They are elected to serve the wider theological task of the church as a whole by shouldering this task as a research project governed by the methodological rules that arise out of the evangelical commitment to convertive piety. To the extent that evangelical theologians engage in the theological calling from an unabashedly evangelical stance, they too comprise, in at least a certain sense, a *begrenzte Gemeinschaft*—a boundaried people. They constitute a people commissioned to offer their particular witness to the theological community as a whole until that glorious day when the ongoing crossing of boundaries has finally resulted in all *Grenzen*—all boundaries—fading from view.