EVANGELICALS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Growing numbers of evangelicals seem optimistic about the possibilities of interreligious dialogue. Their writings seem to recognize the need for some kind of language for talking to those with whom we disagree on the most important questions of life. The writers are wary of dialogue that carries with it the assumptions of religious relativism and pluralism. But even as they are rejecting the implications of dialogue they are arguing—often very tentatively—for an evangelical approach to interreligious dialogue.

I would like to review their arguments regarding what it would take to develop such an approach to dialogue and make some suggestions about where the question might go from here.

I. THE EVANGELICAL RESPONSES TO DIALOGUE

1. *The stagesetters.* Hendrick Kraemer and Stephen Neill were both active in the missions discussions of the twentieth century that shifted back and forth between liberal and conservative approaches to missions. Both Kraemer and Neill longed for the unity of the Church. They did so for both theological and practical reasons. Their theological reasoning rested on their view of the Church, the body of Christ. Their practical reasons rested on their recognition that working together—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist—would be the most efficient, powerful way for the gospel to be spread. It was their desire for unity that made both Kraemer and Neill conciliar missiologists.

Both men, however, were defenders of the radical uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith. Their belief expressed itself in a fierce desire to see the world won for Christ. And it was their defense of exclusive Christianity and the conversionist urge that placed them solidly in the camp of what came to be called evangelical. In their theologies of missions both Kraemer and Neill can be rightly called stagesetters of neo-evangelical missions.

As Neill said: "Christian faith claims for itself that it is the only form of faith for men; by its own claim to truth it casts the shadow of falsehood, or at least of imperfect truth on every other system." He did not say it naively. He recognized the implications both for those of other religions who

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would find his stance offensive and to colleagues—modern thinkers—who would find it equally so.[1]

Kraemer and Neill were not against dialogue. Both saw dialogue as having great value. Picking up on a theme to be frequently used by evangelicals who advocate some form of interreligious dialogue, Neill emphasized that "real dialogue is possible only if all the interlocutors are committed, resolute, and uncompromising" in their own faith traditions.[2]

By being both conciliar and evangelical on the missions front, Kraemer and Neill represented many people in what came to be known as the World Council of Churches (WCC). Their positions as carried on by others, such as Lesslie Newbigin, are still represented by many in conciliar circles.[3] These theologians tend to be much more open to the concepts of interreligious dialogue than others who could not stay in a movement that seemed to encourage such radical disagreements about the uniqueness of Christ. Two examples of such uneasiness were Donald McGavran and Carl F. H. Henry.

2. *The founders.* Representative of the new breed of practice-minded evangelical missiologists is Donald McGavran. Originally a missionary himself, McGavran became best known as founder of the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary. In that role he ushered evangelical missions into the late twentieth century, trying to take into account the world shift from western-centered missions to global missions and yet maintain a strong sense of Christian uniqueness.

Three themes characterized McGavran's position: (1) A high view of Scripture placed the Bible above the intercultural fray as the unique, supernatural revelation of God. (2) A relatively high view of nonwestern cultures recognized that they have many reasonable elements and, for Christians at least, must be viewed as human responses to God's command to be caretakers of creation. This does not mean that all cultures are equally valid. All are imperfect and must be judged by the supernatural standard of Scripture. (3) Missionaries must allow for differences of approach to different cultures depending on many factors, such as cultural conditions, missionary resources, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.[4]

Henry, the prototypical neo-evangelical theologian and theorist, spoke more directly to the prospects of interreligious dialogue for evangelicals. He began by striking the essential evangelical theme that dialogue must not be seen as an end in itself but as a means to an end: "Conversation is more and more replacing conversion as a Christian missionary objective."[5]

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[1] S. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (London: Oxford, 1961) 16.

[2] Ibid. 4–5.

[3] See L. Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC Mission Series, 1987); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[4] D. McGavran, *The Clash Between Christianity and Cultures* (Washington: Canon, 1974). See also an interesting conservative theory of missions that takes seriously the non-Christian side of the equation in J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961).

[5] C. F. H. Henry, "Confronting Other Religions," *Christianity Today* (August 1969) 31.

Yet after this initial caution about the role dialogue is to play, Henry goes on to recognize its merits: reciprocal understanding, the common support of supernatural reality (the rejection of secularism), moderation of international conflict, relief of human suffering, and social justice.

Henry recognized that many use interreligious dialogue as a replacement for evangelism and makes the point that this is a minority opinion both among Christians and non-Christians: "All this (universalism) sounds rather strange to evangelicals . . . but it sounds equally strange to spokesmen for non-Christian religions." An often-struck theme in evangelical discussions of interreligious dialogue is the idea that the religions of the world (at least the majority views in those religions) are as exclusivistic as Christianity. To be religious is to be committed to a single brand of religious truth.

Henry ends his discussion with what can only be seen as a ringing endorsement of interreligious dialogue, albeit of a certain kind: "The only alternative to dialogue that deletes the evangelical view is dialogue that expounds it. The late twentieth century is no time to shirk that dialogue."

Not all evangelicals in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s seemed willing to take up the gauntlet of dialogue that Henry had thrown on conservative turf and begin to define more precisely just what evangelical dialogue was. Rejectors of dialogue tended to be those who remembered the dangers of dialogue if it is used as a replacement for conversion-oriented missions. And yet almost all of the articles evangelicals have written on the subject of interreligious dialogue have positive things to say about dialogue too.

3. *The reactives.* The typical evangelical article that questions interreligious dialogue almost always begins with the argument of what can happen to Christian uniqueness when dialogue replaces evangelism. Charles Kraft was one of the first to articulate the danger: "Approaches to witness that consider mere 'presence' or 'dialogue without persuasion' as sufficient have not taken the 'herald/ambassador' analogy seriously."[6] Kraft of course was not saying anything particularly new. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, for example, had said something very similar: "The dialogue will be all the richer if both of us give ourselves as we are. For the Christian that giving must include witness."[7] But for evangelicals that witness must be always spelled out clearly and seen to include attempts to evangelize.

Still, even with cautions like this the essential ambivalence of evangelicals toward dialogue soon appears. As Kraft put it: "The Bible goes considerably beyond revealing merely intellectual truth or information. . . . God is portrayed mainly as a God of dialogue who interacts with us, not simply a God of monologue who makes pronouncements above us."[8]

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[6] C. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) 279.
[7] W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 118.
[8] Kraft, *Christianity* 214.

This pattern is common among evangelical writers of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: disclaimer, tentative argument as to why evangelicals should dialogue (often from Scriptural warrants), and then some rather creative support for dialogue. Kraft's contribution is to locate dialogue in culture, as a methodology come of age: "God's communication with humanity is depicted in the Bible as coming to humans in familiar, expected ways. To people who believed he would speak through dreams and visions, he spoke through dreams and visions. To those who looked for prophets, . . . prophets. To those who looked for written documents, . . . written documents."[9] And in an age of dialogue (as writers such as Reuel Howe were wont to refer to the twentieth century[10]), dialogue—but dialogue with an evangelical twist.

David Hesselgrave is another evangelical missiologist who has written in favor of dialogue. He too begins with objections and cautions: "All too often ecumenical interfaith dialogue has been built on sub-Christian views of revelation, Christ, and man."[11] And Hesselgrave added an interestingly unique caution in some of his writings. He often wondered aloud if evangelicals were ready for dialogue, perhaps thinking evangelicalism was still in a reacting stage against WCC influences that made more positive engagement impossible. But then, in spite of the cautions, he says, "Evangelicals need more bravery when it comes to interreligious dialogue. There must be some old-fashioned daring."[12] Why? Because "if the Christian message is to be understood, it must be framed with reference to the context of competing worldviews and faiths. . . . The question for evangelicals is not *Shall we engage in dialogue?* but *In what kinds of dialogue should we engage?*"[13] To answer his own question, Hesselgrave outlines "evangelical dialogue" as dialogue that "answers questions and objections of unbelievers, proclaims the good news, and beseeches men to repent and believe."[14]

If Hesselgrave's dialogue sounds suspiciously like traditional evangelism, so be it. He wrote in an era when even calling favorably for something named dialogue ran the danger of putting one in the objectional segment of the WCC camp, for good or for ill. Dialogue was something closely identified with the subunit on Dialogue With Men of Living Faiths, and distance was required. Arthur Glasser made sure the distance was clear. In talking about a recent conference he had attended he said, "My problem arose not over the ease with which Christ's Lordship was confessed—I do not doubt the sincerity of any who confessed Jesus as Lord—but over their reluctance, having so confessed him, to focus on the related issue of truth."[15] In response to Stanley Samartha, chairman of the WCC's subunit

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[9] Ibid.

[10] R. Howe, *The Miracle of Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1965).

[11] D. Hesselgrave, "Interreligious Dialogue—Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives," *Theology and Mission* (ed. D. Hesselgrave; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 229.

[12] Ibid. 227.

[13] Ibid. 235.

[14] Ibid.

[15] A. Glasser, "A Paradigm Shift: Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," *Missiology* 9/4 (October 1981) 398.

on dialogue, Glasser asks, "Can one be a true disciple of Jesus and not engage in the struggle for truth? . . . The question is not superiority, but truth."[16] And again we have the lukewarm support of dialogue that sounds suspiciously like evangelism: "The basic evangelical approach to dialogue: to engage the listener's minds to bear witness to Jesus Christ."[17]

It is almost as if evangelicals of this era were doing a *quid pro quo* on ecumenicals regarding terminology. Evangelicals had seen terms like mission, evangelism and witness invested by ecumenicals with meanings foreign to the traditional ideas of conversion-minded missions. In retaliation it seems that they chose to take the idea of dialogue and not only object to the theory behind its use but also coopt the term so that it is little more than an alternative evangelism technique. One of the most articulate and thorough articles of this genre was written by Paul Schrotenboer in which he said, "Dialogue . . . is a kind of witness (testimony) . . . or at least a prelude to witness but never a substitute for witness."[18] Schrotenboer is sure that the concept of dialogue is rife with inconsistencies and misunderstandings: "On the one hand, many Christians suspect that dialogue derives from the conviction that all religions are fundamentally equal. On the other hand, adherents of other religions look upon interreligious dialogue as an undercover effort on the part of Christians to proselytize them."[19] Schrotenboer summarizes the problems under three headings: dialogue as the way to truth (instead of revelation), dialogue presupposing a relativistic view of religions, and dialogue with a goal of some kind of syncretism. The solution to dialogue that is really a thinly described attempt to attack the absolute truth of Christianity is dialogue that starts by openly admitting the absolute truth of Christianity. To support this claim Schrotenboer quotes Samual Ryan: "Only sociological dialogue, not theological, can be had with people of other religions. . . . Any dialogue with people of other faiths can have only one purpose: to know them in order to evangelize them."[20]

Inherent in these views of dialogue is a reluctance to see the religious playing field as anywhere near level. Dialogue is not risky for Christians because we have truth. "As Christians," Harvie Conn notes, "we must be willing to do interreligious dialogue with a measure of risk. But the methods we adopt for that encounter cannot put at risk our commitment to Jesus Christ"[21]—which does not sound as though anything very important is being risked. Yet then Conn goes on to say, "Affirming the finality of Christ does not relieve us of the responsibility to explain the relationship between Christianity and other religions."[22]

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[16] Ibid. 399.

[17] Ibid. 396–397.

[18] P. Schrotenboer, "Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 12/3 (July 1988) 209.

[19] Ibid.

[20] S. Ryan, *International Review of Missions* (January 1976).

[21] H. Conn, "Do Other Religions Save?", *No Fault of Their Own: The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* (ed. W. Crockett and J. Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 205.

[22] Ibid. 207.

If the views we have listed here under "reactives" sound ambiguous, it is because they are. I think given the circumstances of the WCC-NAE religious politics and the controversies of the last century the ambiguity is both understandable and justified. But Conn's final comment about the need for evangelicals to explain the relationships between Christianity and other religions is a good one. And it in effect has been the agenda of a new generation of evangelicals who have adopted a more positive overall approach to interreligious dialogue.

4. *The proactives.* Jacques Ellul makes the point that the Hebrew people of 2000 BC were set in the midst of cultures from which they could not or did not want to be shut off. So they learned the cultures and then used them as the dictates, the truths, of their religion required. Ellul says that just the opposite is happening today. Christians find themselves in the midst of alien cultures, but instead of learning and then using the cultures Christianity is being learned and then used by the cultures—many times with Christianity's apparent consent.[23] This is the subversion of Christianity.

We do live in a dialogical age. We live in an age where homogeneity of thought is the exception rather than the rule. Diverse cultures, religions and worldviews are the stuff of which our countries and neighborhoods are made. We simply cannot change that. The question is whether we let the techniques of dialogue required for living in such a culture drive Christianity or whether Christianity discovers in a dialogical culture forms that can be useful in communicating the gospel, forms that do not violate the basic tenets of the faith.

A group of evangelicals seems to be aware of these needs, of moving beyond just defining dialogue in terms of a hundred-year-old missions debate and defining it on evangelical Christian terms. Perhaps the best chronological event with which to associate this movement is the Lausanne Missions Conference held in 1974. The official statement of the conference had this to say about dialogue: "Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand."[24] Although evangelicals still see dialogue as inextricably tied to missions, there seemed a willingness to identify with functions both distinct and complementary. Leighton Ford noted after the first conference: "Christians can enter into conversation with Jews, Muslims, and others on a basis of friendship, of sharing common concerns we have as human beings, of witnessing to our knowledge of the true God."[25]

The most articulate spokesman for this point of view, especially as it relates to dialogue, is John Stott, the organizer of the first Lausanne

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[23] J. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 16.

[24] *Lausanne Covenant*, paragraph 4, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (ed. J. D. Douglas; Minneapolis: World Wide, 1975) 4.

[25] L. Ford, "An Interview with Leighton Ford," *Reformed Journal* (November 1976) 14.

meeting. Stott decries what he calls extreme views that try to decide if there is a place in mission for evangelism, socio-political action and dialogue. One of the extremes is the position taken that proclamation is all. The other is that proclamation is dead and needs to be replaced. True mission must include all three: proclamation, deeds, and dialogue: "Dialogue is a token of genuine Christian love, because it indicates our steadfast resolve to rid our minds of prejudices and caricatures which we may entertain about other people; to struggle to listen through their ears and look through their eyes so as to grasp what prevents them from hearing the gospel and seeing Christ; to sympathize with them in all their doubts, fears, and hang-ups."[26]

Stott uses a definition of dialogue stated at the National Evangelical Anglican Congress at Keele in 1967: "Dialogue is a conversation in which each party is serious in his approach both to the subject and to the other person, and desires to listen and learn as well as to speak and instruct."[27] The notable aspect of this definition—especially when compared with some of the older evangelical documents—is the openness to conversation, listening, and learning from people on the other side of the dialogue table.

To be sure, the cautions are not entirely gone. As Stott notes: "Often the modern dialogue of Christians with non-Christians seems to savour rather of unbelief than of faith, of compromise than of proclamation."[28] But in spite of such cautions the embrace of the idea of dialogue is unmistakable. It is obvious that for Stott the reasons in favor of dialogue far outweigh those against it:

> Authenticity: If we do nothing but proclaim the gospel to people from a distance, our personal authenticity is bound to be suspect.
> Humility: As we listen to another person, our respect for him as a human being made in God's image increases.
> Integrity: A real search for truth demands give and take.
> Sensitivity: We need to be sensitive to the physical and spiritual needs of other people. And, the Holy Spirit often speaks through other people.[29]

Stott's position is taken up by several other evangelicals, sometimes even more forcefully. Waldon Scott evaluates current evangelical approaches: "The inadequacies of (separation, confrontation) have become obvious to our generation."[30] Scott traces the roots of this recognition of inadequate approaches but warns that evangelicals have taken part in the search for a new missions paradigm to only a limited extent.[31] This is too bad, Scott says, because evangelicals have a great deal to contribute to the search, particularly in the areas of the Biblical basis for dialogue, an

[26] J. Stott, "Dialogue," *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975) 81.

[27] Ibid. 60–61.

[28] Ibid. 63.

[29] Ibid. 71–73.

[30] W. Scott, "No Other Name: An Evangelical Conviction," *Christ's Lordship and Religious Pluralism* (ed. G. Anderson and T. Stransky; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981) 69.

[31] Scott quotes Jack Shepherd in a lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary: "Evangelicals are the losers for not relating to those who don't share their view of missions."

understanding of the phenomenon of conversion, and a sense for keeping alert to the dangers of the demonic.

Scott, on the other hand, is optimistic about evangelical involvement that often goes unnoticed, especially on the part of evangelicals who live outside North America: "Evangelicals outside North America frequently have a more open approach to non-Christian religions and interreligious dialogue."[32] He then mentions agencies and organizations like the Overseas Ministries Study Center, the Evangelical Alliance of Great Britain, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, the World Evangelical Fellowship, and the Asian Leaders Conference on Evangelism. "Far more (dialogue) occurs at the grassroots level in every continent than is commonly acknowledged—evangelical missionaries are involved in dialogue to an extent not commonly recognized."[33]

Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, after noting the different road taken by evangelicals after the formation of the WCC in 1948 (citing particularly the creation of their own missionary societies, fund-raising organizations, the NAE, and their own missions conferences in Berlin,[34] Wheaton[35] and Lausanne, among others), still worry that evangelicals are fifty years behind the times in terms of dialogue: "It's time to put dialogue with other religions on the agenda."[36] Why? "Dialogue is being open to other religions, to recognize God's activity in them, and to see how they are related to God's unique revelation in Christ."[37]

In sum, a group of evangelicals represented by Ford, Stott, Scott, Samuel and Sugden are calling for the creation of an evangelically-oriented interreligious dialogue that does justice both to the conversion-minded model of missions and the respect and love due all people, even of other religions. It is perhaps a sign of the advanced state of this call and discussion that some are already sounding like politicians who are forever noting that only we can do it and that we should. "By diluting Jesus' universality and normativity, we actually destroy true interreligious dialogue. A genuine dialogue involves two persons with fundamentally different claims to truth."[38] Thus Timothy Westergren in moving all the way from the "dialogue-is-anti-mission" posi-

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[32] Scott, "Name" 67.

[33] Ibid. 94. Scott defines dialogue in this way: "Evangelicals do not see interreligious dialogue as a means for discovering God but as a way of understanding humankind, and an opportunity to experience and express solidarity with our fellow human beings" (p. 66).

[34] Billy Graham in an address to this missions meeting preached against the search for points of commonness with other world religions and rejected the position that all other persons, regardless of religious orientation, would be saved. See *One Race, One Gospel, One Task: World Congress on Evangelism, Berlin, 1966* (ed. C. F. H. Henry and S. Mooneyham; Minneapolis: World Wide, 1967).

[35] This meeting was perhaps most notable for its attempt to revive the spirit of the watchword, the need to evangelize the world in this generation. See *The Church's Worldwide Mission: Proceedings of the Congress at Wheaton, Illinois, 1966* (ed. H. Lindsell; Waco: Word, 1966).

[36] V. Samuel and C. Sugden, "Dialogue With Other Religions—An Evangelical View," *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (ed. Samuel and Sugden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 128.

[37] Ibid. 122.

[38] T. Westergren, "Do All Roads Lead to Heaven?", *Through No Fault* (ed. Crockett and Sigountos) 175.

tion to the "only-missionary-oriented-religions-can-dialogue-properly" position. A long jump indeed. But what would such an evangelical dialogue involve?

5. *The researchers.* It would first of all require Scriptural support. Nothing is more important for an evangelical endeavor. Does Scripture support the Christian in his or her involvement in dialogue?

The answer given so far to such a question has the same mixed quality to it that the above authors have given to dialogue in general. Many have found Scriptural instances of dialogue, properly understood. For example, Alan Johnson and Robert Webber note that "from time to time the biblical text reveals that the prophets received their message from God in a dialogue form. . . . Portions of Scripture arose through the interaction of the recipient's response to the divine Word and not merely through monologue."[39] Johnson and Webber then cite Jeremiah 11–12 as an example of this.

But most of the scant work on this subject has been done on NT sources, the most thorough by I. H. Marshall.[40] As with the early reactions against dialogue because of its connection to WCC interpretations, it is obvious that Marshall has such an interpretation of dialogue in mind as he begins his researches: "It is necessary to ask whether the essential content of the gospel is something 'given' to the evangelist or can undergo radical alteration in a common search for truth along with non-Christians."[41] The obvious answer to this question for evangelicals is no. The "essential content of the gospel" not only cannot be subject to "radical alteration" but also cannot undergo any alteration at all. Evangelicals must *ipso facto* decline any dialogue that claims to "change" truth. What Marshall is overlooking by stating the question in this way, however, is that many understand dialogue to be a process not of manufacturing new truth but of deepening one's understanding of unchangeable truth.

Still, this start does not minimize the importance of Marshall's work. He does a word study of *dialegomai.* It appears ten times in Acts and usually has the meaning of preaching with some time after proclamation for discussion—not to reformulate truth, but to clear up any misunderstandings that occurred to listeners.[42] Marshall then moves to instances of two-way conversations, not necessarily characterized by the word *dialegomai.* Jesus has "a couple of dozen" such encounters in the synoptics. They do not involve manufacturing truth but are "elucidations of an already proclaimed message."[43] The gospel of John is the "best source for dialogue." It

[39] A. Johnson and R. Webber, *What Christians Believe: A Biblical and Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 20.
[40] I. H. Marshall, "Inter-Faith Dialogue in the New Testament," *Evangelical Review of Theology* (July 1989) 196–215; cf. also C. Wright, "The Christian and Other Religions: The Biblical Evidence," *Themelios* 9 (January 1984) 5.
[41] Marshall, "Inter-Faith" 197.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid. 200.

fits the whole character of John, Marshall thinks. He notes the many instances of Jesus in dialogue with his opponents. But still this dialogue is a questioning of Jesus by those who have heard but not understood properly his message.[44] The evidence does suggest, however, that "one setting for evangelism was discussion and debate."[45] Paul used dialogue as a teaching tool, much as Plato used it in his dialogues—imagining possible questions and then refuting them. This is especially evident in Romans (3:1, 5, 27, 31; 4:1, 9; 6:1, 15; 7:7; 9:14, 19). Marshall's conclusions from his survey are that (1) "Christians must practice dialogue with non-Christians (2) to understand the situation of non-Christians and how the gospel answers their needs, and (3) answer questions raised by people to involve them in a personal encounter with the claims of God."[46] It is very important to Marshall to show that the mind of the evangelist is not changed at all in dialogue. A question that comes to mind regarding Marshall's position: Even if we held that the apostle Paul was above changing his mind or modifying his position because the incidents in Scripture we are referring to are in a sense "inspired" incidents (or at least the record of them is inspired), modern-day evangelical preachers do not seem to be similarly covered. We make mistakes of expression and understanding (at least I do), and I am sometimes helped by both intentional and unintentional clarifications from people to whom I talk, even those who may be non-Christian. In this sense dialogue helps sharpen my understanding and message.

A missiological approach to dialogue in the NT is discussed by David Hesselgrave, who recognizes that "an evangelical understanding of dialogue must find its basic purposes, presuppositions, and prototypes in the Scriptures."[47] Hesselgrave finds prototypes aplenty in Scripture. Jesus dialogued with Jewish religious leaders, Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman. Paul dialogued in the synagogues, marketplaces, the school of Tyrannus, and the church at Troas.

Certain kinds of dialogue are not found in the NT, however—particularly dialogue with a view to discover undiscovered truth. NT dialogue is always part of proclamation, subordinate to proclamation, and aimed at conversion.[48]

Hesselgrave does find in the NT ample evidence of the basic presuppositions needed for dialogue: our common humanity, the fact that we are all made in the image of God, and the *sensus divinatus*, as Calvin called it, the urge we all have to find God. Hesselgrave finds in these universal traits of being human indications of the common theological ground for interreligious dialogue.

This search for theological common ground is the third area of research needed for an evangelical theology of interreligious dialogue. What do evangelical theologians have to say about the possibilities of dialogue?

44 Ibid. 210.
45 Ibid. 212.
46 Ibid. 214–215.
47 D. Hesselgrave, "Interreligious" 232.
48 Ibid. 233.

Norman Geisler focuses his attention on the absolute need for some kind of common ground so communication can take place between Christian and non-Christian.[49] Yet where can it be found? Geisler notes that neither Christian nor non-Christian will accept the other's hermeneutic as authoritative, thus providing the common ground. For example, Christians will not cede to the Qur'ān the authority it holds for Muslims. And for their part, Muslims will not cede to the Bible the authority it holds for Christians (although Muslims go further in doing this for the Bible than Christians do for the Qur'ān). Geisler also points out that it is futile to try to build some kind of halfway bridge, cobbling together elements of both religions for a place to stand. So how can communication take place?[50]

Geisler suggests that it is only in the recognition that each religion posits absolute truth for itself—that all religions claim absolute truth—that common ground exists. This recognition about the nature of religion itself becomes the common ground: "Dialogue presupposes common ground for meaning. . . . Only one worldview can be true. . . . The system that is true provides the basis. . . . Both participants believe it is their system that makes meaningful dialogue possible."[51] Thus it is the possibility of truth that forms the basis for dialogue, even as both participants rest assured in themselves that it is their truth that will in the end be shown to be the ultimate one.

Harold Netland agrees that, "properly defined, dialogue is not incompatible with a commitment to evangelism."[52] In fact for Netland it is essential to good evangelism: "Informed dialogue is essential if the proclamation of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is to be carried out effectively."[53] To be Christian, dialogue must avoid relativism, a dialectic search for truth, a nonpropositional search for truth, and an antimissions bias, and dialogue must model Jesus' example of encounter/proclamation, respect other human beings, be reconcilable with evangelistic efforts, and be marked by humility, sensitivity and courtesy.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic call for dialogue among recent evangelical writers is that sounded by Clark Pinnock: "Let the claims be made, let the information be shared, let the issues be weighed, and let dialogue take place."[54] But what kind of dialogue is Pinnock calling for? Truth-seeking dialogue, but truth-seeking understood within the parameters of other missions activities like proclamation, church planting, healing, exorcism,

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[49] N. Geisler, "Some Philosophical Perspectives on Missionary Dialogue," *Theology and Mission* (ed. Hesselgrave); cf. also T. Peters, "Confessional Universalism and Interreligious Dialogue," *Dialog* 25 (1984) 145–149.

[50] Geisler, "Perspectives" 244.

[51] Ibid. 249.

[52] H. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 301.

[53] Ibid. 296.

[54] C. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 123. To finish the quote: "World missions promotes the contest of the gods and useful competition between the religions concerning the nature of reality."

nurture, works of love, and so forth. Truth-seeking for Pinnock is not the manufacturing of new truth as we go along but discovering of absolute truth, which, because of our human frailties, we know only imperfectly. This kind of truth-seeking is well attested in Scripture: Jesus in the temple at twelve, Paul in Jewish synagogues, Colossian use of pagan phrases in the service of Christian truth.[55] The apostle Paul, especially, entered into religious competition by way of dialogue, through the exchanging of ideas, and through respectful sharing, says Pinnock.[56] "One reason why the Spirit can use truth seeking dialogue in missions is because it is an excellent way to get at issues in the presence of disagreement."[57]

Pinnock sees evangelicals involved in dialogue as walking the middle road between relativism and fideism. Ironically, given the history of those who traditionally support dialogical activities, both relativism and fideism kill true dialogue—relativism because it kills the motivation to dialogue (if all truths are roughly equal, why dialogue about them?), and fideism because it makes rational discussion a luxury one can either have or not have depending, I suppose, on how the Spirit moves one.[58] Traditionally, conservative Christians have avoided dialogue because of its misuse (Pinnock cites Karl Barth and Martyn Lloyd-Jones as examples of those who have rejected it on this basis), but that is not a good enough reason to reject it: "Bad dialogue should not drive out good dialogue."[59]

A fourth area of exploration evangelicals are making in relation to dialogue is in the area of human community. Bruce Nicholls rejects dialogue as a method of seeking truth. But he sees it as vital as a community-identifying and community-building exercise. "Dialogue is a way of life, an attitude of mind as well as a verbal defense and proclamation of the Gospel."[60] "Dialogue," Nicholls reminds us, "means working together in harmony for the good of all people. . . . Dialogue must be a way of life for all men and women of good will."[61] Nicholls is concerned that dialogue be seen as associated with but still distinct from the missionary impulse: "Everything the church is and does must have a missionary dimension but not everything has a missionary intention."[62]

Nicholls is among the growing chorus of evangelical voices that are calling for evangelicals to get more involved in dialogue. ("The question before the evangelical Christian is not whether our goals and methodologies are biblical, but whether they are biblical enough or big enough to encompass the whole of biblical revelation."[63]) Marvin Wilson sounds a similarly hopeful

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[55] Ibid. 130–131.

[56] He cites Acts 17:16–31; 19:8–10 as his examples.

[57] Pinnock, *Wideness* 131–132.

[58] Ibid. 135–137.

[59] Ibid. 133.

[60] B. Nicholls, "The Witnessing Church in Dialogue," *Evangelical Review of Theology* (January 1992) 62.

[61] Ibid. 52.

[62] Ibid. 54.

[63] Ibid. 48.

note: "One segment of evangelicals fear dialogue. Another, and I am one of them, are enthusiastic about the future prospect of dialogue."[64]

II. THE ISSUES

Some evangelicals are arguing for an evangelical approach to interreligious dialogue. The issues they raise, along with tentative answers, can be summarized under four headings.

1. *Truth.* Dialogue cannot manufacture truth. God is truth. Dialogue can discover forgotten truth and sharpen perceptions of known truth. Dialogue assumes the existence of a single, unified truth.

2. *Commitment.* Dialogue does not demand tentative commitment. Dialogue does demand honest expressions of commitment to one another. The best dialogue takes place between people committed to the absolute truth of their religious traditions.

3. *Attitude.* Dialogue does not demand acceptance of all the dialogue partner's ideas. Dialogue does demand acceptance of the dialogue partner as a person deserving respect and love. No dialogue can take place if the integrity, good will, and personhood of the other is in any way compromised.

4. *Evangelism.* Dialogue does not demand that either side eschew evangelism. Dialogue does demand nonmanipulative, chaste evangelism. Dialogue must be seen in some kind of relationship to evangelism.

[64] M. Wilson, "Current Evangelical-Jewish Relations: An Evangelical View," *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984); cf. also R. Mouw, "Inter-Religious Dialogue: Implications for Ministry in the Contemporary World," *Insights: A Journal of the Faculty of Austin Seminary* 107/1 (Fall 1991) 37–45; D. Bosch, "The Church in Dialogue," *Missiology* 16/2 (April 1988) 131–147.