

## **DEFINING EVANGELICALISM'S BOUNDARIES IN MINISTRY**

Evangelical Theological Society, November 2001

Dr. James E. Sweeney

Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon

A steady flow of writing and publishing about evangelical ministry pours off the presses every day. It ranges across a spectrum of purpose and perspective, from "How to Make Your Worship Ministry Exciting and Relevant," to sober analysis and critique of the overall state of evangelical ministry. It reflects concern for both ministry function and ministry form. And it coincides with a period of history in which form is outstripping function for the attention of the church. Today it is fair to say that in terms of form, evangelical ministry is virtually "up for grabs".

It is necessary to stay alert to the fresh winds of creativity and innovation in contemporary ministry, and it is also necessary to listen sensitively to voices expressing concern about trends within evangelicalism that have the potential to lead us astray.

While wishing to steer a course that maintains my own positive enthusiasm for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I want nevertheless to begin with this question: Is evangelical ministry in trouble?

### ***Is Evangelical Ministry in Trouble?***

If we take seriously the burden of many who have published assessments in the past few years, we might have to concede that evangelical ministry is indeed in trouble. In fact, it is quite common to find those assessments expressed in terms of crisis. To be sure, the voices of alarm do not all share the same perspective. There are those who see the church as "increasingly (if not terminally) out of touch with the postmodern culture."<sup>1</sup> From the other end of the spectrum, and voicing a concern raised by many, one observer has questioned whether or not American evangelicalism and its ministry will continue to look anything like the historic evangelical Protestantism of which it is an heir.<sup>2</sup> Such concerns must be taken into account in what follows. I hasten to say that this is not intended as a critique of the church and its ministry--it is about exploring boundaries. While there is indeed cause for concerns among those who believe in the church, there is also much to celebrate. Having spent significant time reading and reflecting on the growing body of literature related to this issue, I am indebted to many others for their observations and assessments on which I've drawn.

The title I was given--*Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries in Ministry*--posed some initial challenges. The first was definitional. I wrestled with the concept of "boundaries" in this context inasmuch as the term does suggest a map of a

territory that is clearly known. I don't need to convince this audience of how elusive is a consensus on a definition of "evangelical." But in necessarily using the term as an adjective to qualify ministry, I would put the subject at hand in this way: Can we describe in adequate fashion the *contours* of ministry that can be characterized as evangelical?

There is a sense here in which I prefer *contours* to *boundaries*, for the term suggests shape rather than territory. And this discussion will seek to examine the shape, the contours, of ministry appropriate to evangelicalism. One particular nuance of the term *boundaries* is pertinent. The term does suggest a line drawn in the sand, which when stepped over may put one in very different territory. I do want to draw on that imagery to some extent, not so much to identify contemporary ministries that are "out of bounds," as to rather explore ministry territory mandated for the church which we have yet to occupy effectively as evangelicals. In other words, at what points are we failing to be fully evangelical in ministry by default?

In considering evangelical boundaries in ministry, I have taken a cue from Millard Erickson who has asked elsewhere how we might determine whether a given theological position is evangelical or not. He acknowledges this is a sticky question, but he recasts it in terms of what he calls a "theological version of Zeno's paradox" in reverse. The question becomes one of "how far one may move, or how many times one may halve the distance between things and still remain within the original group." As he works out the implications in theology, he concludes that "surely there must come some point where the line has been crossed, and at least a hybrid must be present."<sup>3</sup>

When applied to ministry--that is, to practice in addition to profession--the question has an additional dimension. By this I mean that it is possible for one to sincerely confess evangelical doctrine but then turn to ministry and apply some other criteria. It is appropriate to ask, Is this ministry evangelical? Or has some line been crossed? In seeking an answer we must assess ministry not only in terms of doctrine, but also methodology. Is the methodology a fruit of sound theology, or is it the result of the conditioning of the culture, or is it simply a product of the flesh? The consequences in ministry are as important and distinct as "gold, silver, costly stones," and "wood, hay or straw." Even among those of us who seek to be fully evangelical in our theology, there is always the danger of practicing ministry on some other terms. And we may indeed have non-evangelical ministry, or some hybrid.

Another challenge is the rapidly shifting face of ministry in our time. As just noted, in terms of *form*, how we "do" ministry at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems virtually "up for grabs." So quickly do trends in the church sweep into view, receive a flurry of attention, and then give way to the next wave, it is difficult to absorb the literature describing them before they disappear. Intentionally and

unintentionally, we contribute to this culture of rapid change. I recall seeing in a publication of a well-known evangelical organization a statement of purpose that said in essence, we see our mission to be the promotion of innovation and change. It went on to note that before a book describing the most recent ministry innovation can be digested, it is obsolete and another innovation has already taken its place. This simply underscores the fact that it is sometimes a tricky business to find a place to stand from which to observe and assess the shape of evangelical ministry.

We need to note that observations made here largely concern evangelical ministry in the West--especially North America. While acknowledging that the center of gravity of Christianity has dramatically shifted to other parts of the world over the past quarter century, time will limit our scope here.

What follows in this paper is a brief examination of the fundamental contours of ministry in terms of the theological foundations which mark its evangelical character. Since our scope must necessarily be limited, we will specifically examine three critical boundary markers, considering how we might strengthen the evangelical integrity of ministry by cultivating it in the soil of sound theology.

### ***The Theology-Ministry Disconnect***

Our fundamental proposition is this: Authentic evangelical ministry is inextricably linked to and shaped by sound theology. Sadly enough, in our day this is not a given. The lack of a clear and necessary linkage of ministry and theology has been thoroughly documented. It became glaringly evident to me a few years ago in a conference for seminary deans and mega-church pastors facilitated by Leadership Network. The issue at hand was a discussion of the many and varied ministries being offered by these huge churches. As one mega-ministry pastor was describing the vast array of "niched" ministries his church made available, someone raised his hand and asked, "Could you talk to us a bit about the theology underlying your strategies?" His immediate answer was striking. He said, "This is not about theology; it's about ministry." The disconnect was blatant.

It is this disconnect which should trouble us. When Thomas Oden's *Pastoral Theology* was published in 1983, he was then calling attention to the lack of any systematic, scripturally-grounded work laying out pastoral theology in contemporary ministry terms. He observed that throughout the prior century we had somehow lost touch with the biblical and theological foundations necessary for authentic ministry. He pointed out that "we do not have in our time what was so widely available one hundred years ago: a cohesive, systematic discipline of pastoral theology that integrates [the] otherwise disparate pastoral functions into a single theory of ministry."<sup>4</sup> This lack of a clear and intentional theological foundation for ministry has left the church vulnerable and uncertain in a time of massive social and cultural upheaval.

A decade later we were given *Dining With the Devil*, Os Guinness's trenchant critique of the church-growth movement of the 1980's. One reviewer at the time called this treatise "a timely indictment of a secularized evangelicalism that prizes success and worldly acclaim over theology and biblical fidelity." However one sized up his overall assessment of the church's compromise with modernity, it was difficult to gainsay Guinness's alarm with an evangelical movement whose "theological understanding", he wrote, "is superficial." His much debated contention was that, "Today theology is rarely more than marginal in the church-growth movement at the popular level. Discussion of the traditional marks of the church is virtually nonexistent. Instead, methodology is at the center and in control. The result is a methodology only occasionally in search of a theology."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the 1990's a stream of books appeared, treating this same concern, making a credible case for the argument that evangelicalism has loosened its grip on its historic theological center. Many of these voices point out that this development has shown itself most alarmingly in the ministry of the church.

If the evangelical ministry landscape has shifted in some ways that call its evangelical character into question, where do we look for the subterranean fault lines that lie at the cause? Many attempts to answer this question have converged on a common cause, identified one way or another as "modernity." More specifically, on the church's uncritical adoption of the "tools of modernity," the most noteworthy being the tools of management, marketing, and communication. Some have said that "our uncritical embrace of modernity is destroying our ability to shape our lives around biblical truth."<sup>6</sup> Implied in this is the loss of our ability to shape our ministry around biblical truth. In our desire to achieve ministry results acclaimed as successful, have we consciously or unconsciously turned to means and methodologies more informed by alien philosophies, theories, and values than by divinely revealed truth?

At the same time, other criticisms of the church and its ministry have grown alongside the sweeping intellectual and cultural currents of so-called postmodernism, including criticism of the church for failing to restructure its ministries and methods in ways that will connect with a postmodern world.

A corollary of our first proposition--that evangelical ministry is inextricably linked to and shaped by sound theology--is this: Sound theology must always work its way toward its intended end, namely transformational ministry. The central purpose of theology lies in its ultimate outworking in ministry. The contours of evangelical ministry, rightly shaped, are indeed theological contours. A recent writer observed that the sixteenth century Reformation began as a movement to purify the church of corrupt practices--that is, invalid ministry. Theology has the power to influence action--and only good theology will empower good ministry. We should be alert today to whatever forces compete with biblical truth to shape our ministry. This includes an awareness of the impact that *practice* can and

does have on our *theology*. Erickson suggested that while we may prefer the dynamic of theology shaping practice, practice--particularly at the popular level--can impact belief. Likening it to a feedback loop, he says "we are not always as rational as we sometimes think we are; experience frequently influences belief."<sup>7</sup> As evangelicals we should be diligent to work out our practice of ministry under the control and shaping force of sound theology.

### ***Reconnecting***

Effective *ministry* is the ultimate purpose of theology, and we should rejoice wherever this truth is affirmed and receives attention. Ellen Charry, in a recent study of classical Christian theology from the New Testament to the Reformation, makes the point that the shapers of doctrine had uppermost in their minds a pastoral function. They understood that doctrine was pointed toward ministry. In her words, "as these major shapers of the Christian tradition formulated, reformulated, and revised Christian doctrine, its moral, psychological, and social implications were uppermost in their minds. Even when refuting their colleagues or opponents who...were...falling into heresy, they never forgot that God was seeking to draw people to himself for their own good."<sup>8</sup> She goes on to observe that those doctrine-shapers could not envision a notion of doctrine that is not salutary, doctrine not interpreted in terms of its bearing on ministry.

This perspective of theology is reflected in Well's observation that "theology is a knowledge that belongs first and foremost to the people of God and that the proper and primary audience for theology is therefore the church.....And its purpose is... primarily... to nurture the people of God." Theology as such, he says, is a knowledge "that has Christ as its object and his service as its end."<sup>9</sup>

This was clear in the teaching of the Apostle Paul about the purpose of God-breathed Scripture, where he points to the usefulness of Scripture to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness, "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). His following charge to "preach the word" and to teach sound doctrine affirms the central pastoral task described in Ephesians 4:12, "to prepare God's people for works of service", that is, ministry.

It is instructive to note one instance in which believers working from within one mainline denomination issued a call for ministry renewal based on restoring the foundations of sound theology. Observing that "no denomination in the United States has moved as far to the left as the United Church of Christ," Gerald M. Sanders provided an account of the renewal movement within that denomination in the mid-1980's. In 1983 the leaders of the renewal effort issued a statement arguing that "there are limits to what may legitimately be called Christianity,"<sup>10</sup> and they declared that those limits, or boundaries, must necessarily be defined. They saw such theological "defining" as the essential basis for the life and ministry of the Church, which was needed to counter the practices of "giving

human experience priority over Scripture" and "non-evangelical models of mission."<sup>11</sup> A subsequent document was drafted to affirm the theological declarations deemed necessary to address the aberrations of the UCC. Here was a movement in the church acknowledging that ministry cannot be considered truly Christian, let alone evangelical, unless it is rooted in orthodox theology. The specific theological points made in that declaration included "a trinitarian faith; the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ, including the exclusivity of Christ as the way to God; the Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and practice for the church; the gospel as the good news of salvation by grace alone; and a commitment to the "Great Commission."<sup>12</sup> These affirmations can indeed be regarded as contours of evangelical ministry, and we are reminded that the renewal, or reformation, that must occur if ministry is to be evangelical, must work its way out in the church.

### ***How the Methodology of Ministry Should Proceed***

Oden offers direction in this task of planting the roots of ministry in the soil of theology, by calling attention to the way in which the methodology of ministry should proceed. He notes that since what we call pastoral theology is indeed theology, it should proceed by the same method as any well-formed theology. That means "utilizing the well-known...sources for understanding God's self-disclosure in history: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience," and, he asserts, those sources all find their substance in the first, namely Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

His point underscores, for us, two observations. First, central to our concern for boundaries in evangelical ministry is the reality that we are too easily tempted to derive our methodologies from sources other than those Oden has outlined. And second, since the task of ministry and its methods is indeed rooted in Scripture, there is reason to take seriously the growing fear that the evangelical church is in some danger of losing the Bible at its heart. We will take note of these observations as we move along.

### ***Theological Contours of Evangelical Ministry: Defining Boundaries***

Certainly every doctrine affects ministry. While remembering the necessity to submit *all* of our ministry to *all* of the truth of Scripture, I'm going to focus on three primary doctrines which must shape the contours of evangelical ministry. We've identified these three, given the time limits, inasmuch as they provide a critical background against which we can examine some of the contemporary concerns about evangelical ministry. These three contours are Christology, bibliology, and ecclesiology. In my part of the country there is a great interest in the extreme sport of rock climbing. I've often watched in amazement those intrepid souls who scale sheer faces of vertical rock. As they tenuously cling to that rock face, their lives depend on secure ropes attached to steel implements known as pitons, which are driven into the rock. We will consider these primary doctrines as pitons which secure our ministry to the rock.

But these doctrines must represent more than just individual pitons. We have noted that what is needed is a theology for the church that will integrate the many facets of ministry into a cohesive, unified whole. Our method here will be to examine these essential theological boundary markers, with a brief assessment of trends in ministry affected by them. Within what is admittedly a limited examination we'll attempt to sketch the contours of ministry that can be characterized as evangelical.

## **1. The Christological Contour**

Evangelical ministry finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ, and finds its integrity in faithfulness to all that he is, all that he has done, and all that he has said.

### ***The Ownership and Assessment of Ministry***

In our concern for the condition of ministry today, I believe a fundamental question of ownership must be faced. Who "owns" Christian ministry? Lest that seem unnecessary, I should say at this point that the approach taken in this paper to these issues of doctrine and ministry is colored largely by my daily concern to present them, not to theologians, but to seminary students--novitiates if you will, whose convictions are under construction, and who will shape evangelical ministry for the next generation. With most seminarians we are laying groundwork, and the critical words about ministry I want ringing in their ears are those of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian church: "Each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 3:10-11). This is "issue one" in our class on philosophy of ministry. Our ministries have meaning and value only as we undertake them as the shared life and purpose of Christ. Said Thomas Oden, "If ministry cannot be clearly established as the continuation of Jesus' own intentions and practice, we lose its central theological premise."<sup>14</sup> His promised presence sustains and nourishes our ministry; His pattern of servanthood shapes our leadership and service; His proprietary ownership has no rivals.

In the 1970-80's heyday of popular evangelicalism we observed something of a new phenomenon--the identification of personal ownership of "ministries." We watched as personal ministries were promoted, shaped around the cult of personality and celebrity and fueled by the artful use of popular media. When after a time we began to see the stars of these ministries fall from the sky, dragged down by moral and ethical compromise, we often heard them appeal to their followers with renewed urgency for the saving of their ministry. "My ministry" became a common way to speak of whatever enterprise a religious entrepreneurial celebrity created and built. Some of that spiritual chutzpah faded with the demise of the more notorious televangelists, yet in various subtle ways it

still lives among us, and influences this generation of seminarians. It is quite common for us to label our particular efforts in God's vineyard by attaching our own name, as in "Jim Sweeney Ministries." Now, to suggest that that is necessarily inappropriate or wrong would be presumptuous. Indeed, to say that would be to indict the single most influential voice for evangelical ministry of the twentieth century. That is not the point. The point is this: However we say it, or think about it, we must never fail to understand and declare that the owner of all Christian ministry is Christ, the Lord of the Church. When the authoritative assessment of the validity and effectiveness of the ministry of the Church is made, Christ himself will make it. As owner, he alone determines the criteria by which ministry is evaluated.

### ***Christ's Assessment Criteria: Rev. 2-3***

Chapters two and three of Revelation reveal a Christ who walks about in the midst of the churches, examining and assessing their deeds and their hearts with "eyes like blazing fire" and words issued as a "sharp, double-edged sword." It is evident that this Jesus knows the condition of His Church and makes his judgment of it by His criteria. John Stott gathered from his homiletical treatment of the letters to the seven churches, seven distinct criteria. All are theological; none are methodological. Speaking to the seven churches, Christ revealed his criteria: undiluted love for Christ; willingness to suffer for him; truth of doctrine; holiness of life; inward reality; evangelistic outreach; and, wholeheartedness.<sup>15</sup> By the standard of these tests Christ assesses the ministry of His church.

The Apostle Paul highlights the importance of this in reminding the church that "each of us will give an account of himself," and that we will all "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10) His most explicit exposition of this, in his first Corinthian letter, emphasizes first that all ministry must be built upon the foundation of Christ, and secondly, that what we build will be either acceptable or unacceptable by His--Christ's--criteria. What he deems worthy as service done in his name will receive his reward. What he deems unworthy will be consumed by fire, and however sincere the minister, he will suffer loss. "He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames." Strong imagery; strong doctrine.

### ***Christological Boundary Markers for Ministry***

How the doctrine of Christ is taught and understood in the church, through formal and informal means, is critical to sustaining evangelical faith and ministry. It is not sufficient that our "official Christology"<sup>16</sup> is accurately expressed in our written confessions and statements of faith; we must assure that the living church, at every level, is informed and governed by it. Challenges to evangelical beliefs about the person and work of Christ at the popular level are ever present. In discussing how the doctrine of Christ in the church may be influenced by

current movements in theology, Erickson has noted several trends. In a pluralistic culture suspicious of exclusive truth and seeking meaning in relationships, we are not surprised that he includes among the issues at stake an emphasis on Christ's humanity rather than his deity; questions about the exclusivity and uniqueness of Jesus and faith in him; and a subjectivizing of Christian experience and one's relationship with Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Corporate worship experiences need thoughtful attention in this regard. The teaching power of corporate worship as the shared expression of what the church believes, surely calls for our most gifted poets and musicians. But the church must recognize the crucial teaching role its worship leaders play. We cannot be satisfied that they are selected for their artistic talents alone. More than ever they must be thoroughly grounded in theological truth.

In a very practical example, Erickson pointed to what he saw as a tendency to "detheologize" Jesus in the music and worship of many evangelical churches. At the popular level the perceptions of Christ were being shaped by the pervasive music choruses sung, he said, citing a "marked preference for the use of 'Jesus' as compared to 'Christ'" in those choruses. In one widely used music source the ratio of the use of 'Jesus' to the use of 'Christ' is more than ten to one.<sup>18</sup> Noting that among evangelicals who sing these songs the name "Jesus" is generally understood to refer to his humanity, while "Christ" refers to his deity, he suggested that we might expect a continued singing of these songs over time to underscore a dominant emphasis on the humanity of Jesus at the expense of his deity. Gibbs observes this danger in terms of "worship that degenerates into a casual overfamiliarity" and mere sentimentality, lacking transcendent perspective and power.<sup>19</sup> This generation lives in the tension of longing for transcendent meaning while searching for it in the immanent world of interpersonal relationships. The longing will only be fulfilled in a relationship with the God-Man of Scripture.

Wherever a weakened doctrine of Christ persists, the message of the regenerating and transforming power of his work on the cross will be muted. We face the challenge of finding fresh and meaningful ways of preaching and teaching the church the truth about Christ--a boundary truth central to evangelical belief and ministry.

## **2. THE BIBLIOLOGICAL CONTOUR**

*"The Church must be reminded," wrote Michael Horton, "that, when the text of Scripture is no longer regulating her doctrine, life, and worship, her authority and power, which is grounded in the Gospel of Christ revealed in Scripture, will soon be lost."<sup>20</sup>*

We dare not lose our grip on the piton of Scripture in the Church. To do so will result in both a loss of authority and power in our ministry.

The Church speaks with authority only when it gives voice to the revealed Word of God. We have nothing to say to a lost and confused world, nor to a struggling believer, but what God has already said. Indeed, Jesus never lost sight of this in his own incarnational ministry, telling his disciples, "I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life." (John 12:49-50). An unmistakable declaration that our grip on the Word of God is a matter of life and death. Jesus knew He must speak the words that His Father gave Him--it was those, and only those, words that held the promise of eternal life. To a world that believes it can live on bread alone we are charged to proclaim that real life, "eternal life," comes from "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4)

### ***Two Dangerous Trends***

There is a growing consciousness of two dangerous trends in ministry today with regard to the Bible, both of which can be characterized as losing our grip on the essential authority and power we claim for our ministry. First is the danger of not using the Bible at all, and second, the danger of making the Bible something other than it is.

In the first instance, the concern is that in significant ways we are no longer hearing the Word of God. It is widely acknowledged that both the public reading and the exposition of Scripture has declined in evangelical worship services.<sup>21</sup> This has been my own observation as well, and I have had this pointed out to me by laymen in evangelical churches, who ask why. With the exception being in the more liturgical churches, the extent of the public reading of the Bible has diminished, certainly in contrast to the practice of past generations. This trend may affect evangelicalism in at least two distinct ways, when accompanied by what J. I. Packer has called the "breakdown of the great evangelical tradition of large-scale expository preaching Sunday by Sunday."<sup>22</sup> One effect is noted by Packer who suggests a direct link between the *public* reading and exposition of biblical texts and *personal* Bible reading and study. Believing that preaching motivates and assists Christians in their private Bible study, he laments the "deeply unnatural and unsatisfactory" situation in which personal Bible study languishes "due to a lack of effective expository preaching in public worship."<sup>23</sup> The other effect may be a further erosion of the unique authority of the Bible in Christian's lives as preaching utilizes it in ways other than expositionally. When the Bible is not heard on its own terms and in its own words, which is the aim of exposition, then confidence in the authority of the content of the sermon rests fragilely on the integrity of the preacher. We must take him at his word that he is speaking the Word of God. Time after time, laymen from evangelical churches have expressed to me their hunger to hear the Word itself from the pulpit, rather

than merely the principles for Christian living their pastors regularly present. To be sure, Gibbs is correct in pointing out that a fresh style of expository preaching will be needed to communicate in the present cultural context.<sup>24</sup> But if the church is to know the Word and be transformed by it, preaching must provide its exposition.

Interviewed recently in a ministry periodical, Thomas Long plainly spelled out the danger and challenge of a famine of the Word in the church:

Inside the church, I have been concerned at the loss of theological and biblical knowledge on the part of the average lay person....One of the challenges for the preacher in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to rebuild and refresh the memory of the church. Preachers need to give congregations their Bibles back, to rebuild their theological vocabulary, one brick, one word, one concept, one text at a time. When seekers come in the door of the church, we should not suspend our vocabulary, our language,... our gospel--we should teach it.<sup>25</sup>

The almost unimaginable possibility that the Bible could be lost by the church, simply for a lack of reading it, preaching it fully, and teaching people how to study it for themselves may be all too real.

In the second instance--making the Bible something other than it is--we either mistakenly choose or are subtly seduced to accommodate the Bible to the culture we are claiming to reach. We allow the Bible to be used instrumentally in ways its central purpose does not intend. This happens when we allow the culture to define that purpose by insisting that the Bible address its currently felt needs, or when we ourselves seek to adapt the Bible to the perceived needs of the hearer in the hope that this will win their attention and gain us a favorable hearing. Either way, the Bible is not heard, not the transcendent themes of sin, wrath, grace and redemption. Instead of those great themes, one writer reminds us, "we speak of peace of mind, emotional healing, dysfunction and recovery, ...self-esteem," and in doing this we are in danger of using the Bible as little more than a practical guide for life adjustment, and we rob it of its authority and power.<sup>26</sup> In its place is a message grounded more in immanent words than the transcendent Word, without the transforming power needed to release people from the consequences of sin. Michael Horton argues that while many evangelicals may well intend to hold a high view of Scripture by insisting that it is a manual for daily life, they instead end up with a low view of Scripture by trivializing its real meaning and purpose. "The Bible," he says, "is not primarily concerned with organizing our schedules, giving us tips for winning in life and business, or with guiding us into self-fulfillment. It is a story about God and His saving acts, leading up to the cross, the Resurrection, and our Lord's return in order to make all things new."<sup>27</sup> When our preaching is centered on less than these great themes, it risks being reduced to little more than a "modern moralism,"<sup>28</sup> and it is not radically evangelical.

The danger is often subtle. The megachurches have demonstrated that they have been able to develop methodologies capable of drawing large audiences of the unchurched into their preaching services. And in many ways they have taught the church how to minister to a culture long out of touch with its roots in Christianity. Certainly few have done this more successfully than Pastor Rick Warren. His Saddleback Valley Community Church in Southern California is arguably the most widely known church in America. His book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, may well have influenced more evangelical pastors than any other single contemporary book on ministry. Warren should receive our highest commendation for his obvious desire to preach biblically and to reach people for Christ. His criticisms of much evangelical preaching are valid, especially when he criticizes what he calls "Ain't it awful" preaching, which does little more than complain about society and conditions in general and offers little to make a difference.

However, at points, his views on preaching to attract an audience and build the church raise a central question about the character and breadth of authentic biblical preaching. He wants to assure that the message is not compromised, even though it is important to aim it toward the needs the listeners perceive as central to their lives. "Please understand," he says, "The unchurched are not asking that we change the message or even dilute it, only that we show its relevance. Their big question is 'So what?' They want to know what difference our message makes."<sup>29</sup> On the face of it that sounds reasonable, but closer examination raises a critical question. Are we in danger of saying that the hearer must determine what is and what is not relevant about the message? It should be noted that his expressed intention is to direct his preaching ministry toward unchurched, and presumably unregenerate, people. There is a subtle danger here that we are close to surrendering sovereignty to the listener. If we can convince our unchurched hearers that our message is relevant to their lives and needs as *they see them*, they will happily listen. This methodology of preaching to the unchurched may too easily slide toward shaping our messages according to what the crowd wants to listen to. Warren goes on to say, "The truth is not optional. But your audience does determine *which* truths you choose to preach about."<sup>30</sup> Implied is that only those truths the crowd judges "acceptable" and "relevant" will find their way into our preaching. One has to wonder which truths included in the revealed Word may get short-changed in the process.

William Willimon expresses graphically this subtle danger:

In leaning over backward to speak to the modern world, I fear we may have fallen in....When we sought to use sermons to build a bridge from the old world of the Bible to the new, modern world, the traffic was moving in only one direction on that bridge. It was always the modern world rummaging about in Scripture, saying things like, 'This relates to me,' or 'I'm sorry, this is really impractical,' or 'I really can't make sense out of that.' It was always the modern world telling the Bible what's what.<sup>31</sup>

There is a similar threat to the use and authority of Scripture evident in some of the renewed interest in personal Bible study. One analysis sees it in a tendency toward selectivity in both the interpretation and application of Scripture, as people tend to "neglect those passages that do not speak directly to their needs," and "what seems to give validity to a [given] biblical passage is that it speaks to one's need."<sup>32</sup> This has the effect of shifting the basis of authority from the content of Scripture itself to the process going on inside the one who reads it. Erickson suggests that such a reversal of authority may well be an expected result of the current trend of presenting the gospel message primarily as the answer to people's needs.<sup>33</sup>

We will be wise to listen attentively to the concerns of those who fear that we are in danger of allowing other words of authority to replace the Bible in the midst of the church, as well as those who see the authority of the Bible itself dissolving in a sea of subjectivism.

The Reformers insisted that Christ rules and governs His church by and through the Word alone, and most evangelical churches proclaim that Scripture is their only rule for faith and practice. Sustaining this confession as a boundary marker for our ministry is essential if we are to be truly evangelical.

### **3. THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONTOUR**

It is in our theology of the church that all doctrines come together to offer both direction and authority for ministry. The church, and particularly the local church, is where all theology comes to life. Yet the doctrine of the church has received surprisingly little attention in evangelical circles in recent times. David Fisher has pointed this out in blunt terms: "Theological reflection or, more particularly, integrative theological thinking about the church, especially the local church, is missing. Ecclesiology has been marginalized and dethologized."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Erickson tells us "that at *no* point in the history of Christian thought has the doctrine of the church received the direct and complete attention which other doctrines have received."<sup>35</sup> "Somewhere along the way ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, got lost," laments Fisher.<sup>36</sup>

Various reasons are suggested for this condition. Whether it was an "unreflective interdenominationalism"<sup>37</sup> brought on by the battle against liberalism early in the twentieth century, the emergence of parachurch organizations taking up ministries formerly the province of the church, or the influence of modernity and its methodologies that minimized theology--at any rate, evangelicalism had turned its attention away from serious reflection on the nature of the church.

There has not been an absence of writing about the church. But the writing about ecclesiology in recent times has been marked less by theological reflection

than by methodological description. Taken up to a great extent by what we have called "cultural exegesis" and the methods that seem best suited to reaching our post-Christian society, we have neglected the theological bed-rock of what the church *is*--its essence.

"Where there is fuzzy thinking about the church," said one observer, "there will be no clear thinking about the ministry of the church."<sup>38</sup> That should call us to an effort to restore this critical piton of ecclesiology--both its theology and its practice.

Fisher's thoughtful analysis is helpful.<sup>39</sup> He points out that a renewed ecclesiology must begin with the *essence* of the church--what the church *is* precedes all else. Rather than this, most recent thinking about ecclesiology has been centered on what the church does--on matters of organization, structure, and the "practical" ministries we generate. In fact, says Fisher, "the *practice* of ministry *is* now the *theology* of ministry."<sup>40</sup> When we disengage from theology we are left with "ecclesial thinking along human organizational lines." From that posture, it is not surprising that the dominant model for the church in recent years (introduced by the megachurch) has been the corporate organization, and its corresponding CEO leadership model. Nor is it surprising that along with this organizational model has come a growing reliance on "technique." Embracing twentieth century confidence in tangible, practical achievement and progress in material terms, the American church bought into technique. Says McCullough, "Americans...loved technique. Our most favorite home-grown philosophy is pragmatism, the belief that the value of all ideas is determined by their practical consequences."<sup>41</sup> Much of the recent criticism of evangelical ministry, as we have noted, has centered on this issue.

If the starting point for reformation is *essence*, then we must begin to rebuild a more powerful ecclesiology upon the two doctrines that give it life and authority: the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Word. The very real presence of Christ is the ground and center of a transforming doctrine of the church. "We do not understand the core nature of the church," said Greg Ogden, "until we grasp the unspeakable truth that Jesus extended His life on earth through a corporate body that can literally be called 'the body of Christ.'"<sup>42</sup> The early church was in touch with this reality, convinced that the risen Christ was present with them, and "for them that presence was...the essence of the church."<sup>43</sup>

And so it must be today. To the extent that anything else--the "tools of modernity," or the wisdom of the social sciences, or any other pretender--infringes on the powerful presence of Christ, the church and its ministry will be less than evangelical. Thomas Oden put it succinctly in light of Matthew 28:19-20: "The divine command to preach, baptize and teach in Christ's name *relying on His presence* is the ground floor of...the practice of ministry. Take away the Lord's command, and *the living presence to which it witnesses*, and we have little upon which to build any significant idea of Christian ministry."<sup>44</sup>

Neither can we lose sight of the fact that the ministry of the church "lives out of Scripture." It is the "authoritative text for shaping both its understanding and its practice of ministry."<sup>45</sup> Once more, "the church must be reminded that, when the text of Scripture is no longer regulating her doctrine, life, and worship, her authority and power, which is grounded in the Gospel of Christ revealed in Scripture, will soon be lost."<sup>46</sup>

Even as we speak, the church is being "reinvented", to use the language of some contemporary authors. We should be encouraged that at the heart of this "reinvention" is a fresh sense of mission, the apostolic kind of mission for our time that places the church just where it should be, where Christ assumed it would be---engaging a world that needs the gospel. We should be grateful to the megachurch movement, whatever its future, for the role it has played in restoring this missional perspective. Yet, in it all, the reinvented church will sustain its evangelical integrity only as it grows out of a biblical and Christological doctrine of the church.

### ***Neglected Territory?***

Finally, in considering evangelicalism's boundaries in ministry, it is important to ask if there is territory we have neglected. Are we at some points failing to be fully evangelical in ministry by default? Wherever needs exist that have basic theological implications, with spiritual consequences for people's lives, and where answers can come only from understanding and applying Scriptural truth, ministry is needed.

We could include here such areas as bioethics, environmental stewardship, social justice, and of course others. Each of these represents concerns the evangelical church is largely unequipped for in *pastoral* terms. We are aware that many fine evangelical minds are at work in these arenas, but this has yet to work its way into fully-formed *pastoral* ministry to the church. There isn't time to develop this, except to briefly examine the first as an example, to see its inescapably pastoral implications.

Stanley Hauerwas noted in 1986 an accelerating concern for medical ethics, accounting for it in terms of the increased technological power of modern medicine. Our ability to do what was once unimaginable has given rise to concerns that we are not able to manage this power responsibly. For Hauerwas medical ethics itself is a theological issue, and it is an issue which evangelicals must more seriously address. Our technological developments, he argues, merely reflect prior moral presuppositions about human life and how we should care for and preserve it. Campbell reinforces this argument in suggesting that "the answers to the conventional bioethics questions of 'who should decide?' or 'what should we do?'...push back to fundamental issues that require an account of the purpose of human life and destiny."<sup>47</sup>

Hauerwas argued from the premise that "medical ethics" does not so much solve our difficulties as it reflects the moral anarchy of our times. Moving behind the fact of technology which permits so-called medical advances, he questioned what the practice of medicine is truly about in such a society. These are issues that the evangelical church has been astoundingly silent about, inasmuch as they are in essence pastoral issues. Hauerwas exposed the theological dimensions of this issue in probing the real reasons underlying the practice of modern medicine. "Modern medicine's desperate attempt to cure through increasing use of technology may be but a way of avoiding the fact that it lacks any moral rationale for dealing with the inevitability of death."<sup>48</sup> That, it seems to me, is a contention that should raise pastoral antennas.

In the same context, contemporary philosopher Herman de Dijn describes the despair of persons floundering in the spiritual wilderness of modern culture. The way out, he declares, will be led not by philosophers but by prophets--prophetic voices who can reconnect despairing persons with transcendent truth mediated by the Spirit of God.<sup>49</sup> That is a challenge to evangelical pastors to take the lead.

The growing interest in medical ethics has had the effect of focusing attention on the "objective and universal conditions all humans share--i.e., sickness, reproduction, death, etc."<sup>50</sup> These have been historically pastoral issues, the sort of issues that the undershepherd helps the sheep deal with every day in the course of life. The expanding possibilities of medical technology have made them extraordinarily complicated and confusing questions today. The sorts of questions coming from Christians are difficult for most pastors. "What do we do about multiple fertilized eggs that have resulted from our attempts at *in vitro* fertilization?", asks the young couple agonizing over their failed attempts to have children. "How do we know if and when it's morally right to pull the life plug on mother?" "What is really morally wrong with asking my physician to help me die when I've become too great a burden to my family?" Such questions to pastors almost always reflect deep pain and contain an implicit plea for help in knowing if the Bible has anything to say about them. This is an arena of ministry where we as evangelicals have much ground to make up. And there are others like it.

Our steps must take us in the direction of correcting our collective evangelical behavior. Wells has called attention to the loss in the church of a theological center with the power to hold together thought and practice. This cleavage of belief and practice looms as one of the most devastating threats to the life and ministry of the evangelical church. Decade after decade of social statistics has demonstrated that we as evangelicals largely resemble the rest of society in matters of moral and ethical behavior. If in earlier generations the guides for Christian living were established by "driving deep the stakes of theological doctrines and moral behaviors," it appears that in our generation Christians are more likely to behave according to their perceptions of the acceptable norms of their peer group. "They don't read the rule book; they look around their support

group," says one pastor, who believes that only "churches...effective in inculcating biblical truths and values will be,,, effective in discipling the behavior of their parishioners."<sup>51</sup>

If our ministry is truly based on a theology of transformation made possible by regeneration, we need to take seriously our accountability to discern and obey Scripture in these matters. And we need to teach this to the church. It will mean wrestling with complex issues beyond our usual range of ministry, but it is inescapably a pastoral responsibility.

May God bless His Church. And may our scholarship and ministry be pleasing and bring glory to the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999) 23. Sweet's position is that we failed to recognize how "seismically dangerous postmodern culture could be" for Christianity, and now find ourselves overwhelmed by it. He argues that the church must learn to embrace the opportunities of our times and "help invent and prevent, redeem and redream, [the] postmodern future."

<sup>2</sup> John H. Armstrong, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996) 17.

<sup>3</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997) 146-7.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1983) 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Os Guinness, *Dining With the Devil: The MegaChurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993) 26.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Peterson, in endorsement statement on back cover of Guinness, *Dining With the Devil*.

<sup>7</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994) 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 233.

<sup>9</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993) 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald M. Sanders, in *Evangelical Renewal in the Mainline Churches*, ed. by Ronald H. Nash (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1987) 128

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 121, 129.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129, 131.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> John R.W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958) 127.

<sup>16</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?* 209. Erickson emphasizes the importance of serious theological education of lay people, and expresses concern at the gap between what he calls "official" theology (our written confessions and doctrinal statements) and "unofficial" theology (the real theology that shows in our practice and behavior).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 171-172.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 171.

<sup>19</sup> Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 160.

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Horton, "Recovering the Plumb Line, in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996) 246.

<sup>21</sup> John H. Armstrong, *Reforming Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001) 26.

- 
- <sup>22</sup> J.I.Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979) 135.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid. 135.
- <sup>24</sup> Eddie Gibbs, 184. Gibbs makes this point by citing David Hillborn: "My suspicion is that to be effective in the postmodern world, evangelical preachers will need much less to show people the expository wheels going round. The exegetical apparatus will still be necessary, but it will function less as the framework of the sermon and more as its scaffolding. It will have to be removed from view before the sermon is preached." [*Picking Up the Pieces* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997) 60.]
- <sup>25</sup> Thomas G. Long, "The Witness of Preaching," in *Ministry*, July 2001. 9.
- <sup>26</sup> Michael S. Horton, 253.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. 251.
- <sup>28</sup> John H. Armstrong, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, 23.
- <sup>29</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995) 230.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid. 228..
- <sup>31</sup> William H. Willimon, "This Culture Is Overrated," *Leadership*, Winter 1997. 29-30.
- <sup>32</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?* 96.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. 95.
- <sup>34</sup> David Fisher, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996) 76.
- <sup>35</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985) 1026.
- <sup>36</sup> David Fisher, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pastor*, 76.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., 76.
- <sup>39</sup> For much of this discussion of the theological character of ecclesiology I am indebted to David Fisher's analysis in *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pastor*, pp. 70-88.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 78.
- <sup>41</sup> Donald McCullough, "Coming to Terms With Technique," *Christianity Today*, Fall 1993. 84.
- <sup>42</sup> Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990) 32.
- <sup>43</sup> David Fisher, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Pastor*, 81.
- <sup>44</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*. 62.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 11.
- <sup>46</sup> Michael S. Horton, 246.
- <sup>47</sup> Courtney Campbell, "Religion and Moral Meaning in Bioethics," *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998) 24-25.
- <sup>48</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 2.
- <sup>49</sup> Cited in Jerome P. Wernow, *This Vital Death*, 1994. A dissertation presented to the Faculty of Theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. 677.
- <sup>50</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, 2.
- <sup>51</sup> Leith Anderson, *Decade of Volatility: 10 Powerful Trends Facing the Church* (Self-published as a National and International Religion Report, 1991. 18-19.