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EVANGELICALISM AND CHURCH: THE CALL FOR NEW REFORMATION

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In memory of:

Dad and Mom, LEOPOLDO and GENOVEVA who I prayerfully hope
to see again at the parousia.

Dedicated to:

Prof. Conrad J. Wethmar, of the University of Pretoria,
who sparked in me the interest in evangelicalism.

Jed Karsten, the beloved child, who like the rest of the children of the
new generation, may come to know more of Christ.

CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Part One: Analysis of the Phenomenon of Contemporary Evangelicalism	
1. The Prototypal Ecclesial Framework	10
1.1 Introduction	10
1.2 The Prototypal Ecclesial Life-Structures	13
1.3 Conclusion	40
2. The Deformation and Re-Formation of the Prototypal Ecclesial Life-Structure...	41
2.1 The State of the Pre-Reformation Church	41
2.2 The Emergence of the Reformation Movement	46
2.3 The Emergence of Puritanism and Pietism	51
3. The Emergence and Intent of Contemporary Evangelicalism	58
3.1 The Frontier Precursors	58
3.2 The Formal Emergence	61
3.3 The Theological Structure of Contemporary Evangelicalism	66
3.4 The Core of Contemporary Evangelicalism	81
4. Conclusion	91
Part Two: Contemporary Evangelical Ecclesiology as Paradigmatic of Prototypal Ecclesiological Reformation	
5. Contemporary Evangelical Ecclesiological Structure	103
5.1 Transdenominational Operation	103
5.2 Missional Cause	112
5.3 Pneumatic Empowerment	117
5.4 Christological Essence	123
5.5 Conclusion	124

6. Implications of the Synthesis of Contemporary Evangelical Ecclesiological Structure	126
6.1 Contemporary Evangelical ecclesiological framework is prototypal rather than neonatal.	129
6.2 Contemporary Evangelical ecclesiological framework is generally paradigmatic rather than separatistically organistic.	131
6.3 Contemporary Evangelicalism as a paradigm for ecclesial reformation is ecclesially friendly and non-threatening.	134
6.4 Conclusion	137
7. Why the Need for New Reformation	139
7.1 The 1517 Reformation was embryonic rather than terminal.	140
7.2 The Reformation consequence was separatistic rather than restorative.	144
7.3 Christianity is still very denominationalistic rather than unitive.	147
7.4 Ecclesiology is still fragmentary rather than unitive.	150
7.5 The church is now more eschatological than ever.	153
7.6 Conclusion	157
Part Three: Peoplehood of God as Paradigmatic of Prototypal Evangelical Ecclesiology	
8. The Calling of the People of God Preceding the Christian Church	160
8.1 The Calling of God's People Preceding Israel	163
8.2 The Calling of Israel as the People of God	169
8.3 Conclusion	179
9. The Christian Church as the New People of God	181
9.1 The Calling of the People of Christ	181
9.2 Peoplehood of Christ as the Ecclesiological Paradigm	190
9.3 Conclusion	210
Summary and Conclusion	213
Bibliography	215
Bio-data	231

INTRODUCTION

What really is Contemporary Evangelicalism? It seems to be an enigmatic phenomenon, for while it is missionally and globally prolific and pervasive; yet its theological and ecclesiological identities have not yet been made apparent. Thus Stott speaks of the problem of “uncertain evangelical identity.”¹ And Bloesch sees that:

The need for evangelicalism to rediscover its identity and to present a united witness to the church and the world is particularly acute this time when a new modernism threatens to engulf mainline Christianity.²

But with its prolificacy and pervasiveness, there must be something very astounding about its phenomenon that has yet to be discovered.

Noll and his colleagues observe that it is easier to recognize evangelicalism than to define it because:

What we have...is a lot of fancy evangelical hybrids: radical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who are evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelical who are Catholic, evangelical liberationists, evangelical

¹ John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 12. However, Packer is sure that “evangelicalism is an identifiable form of Protestant Christianity and even sees it as “the true mainstream Christianity.” J.I. Packer, “Maintaining Evangelical Theology,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 183, 186. Henry also discusses the evangelical’s search for identity; see Carl F. Henry, *Evangelicals in Search of Identity* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976).

² Donald G. Bloesch, *God, Authority, & Salvation*, vol. 1, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (Peabody, MA: Prince, 2001), 1.

ecumenicalists, ecumenicalists who are evangelical, evangelical feminists, young evangelicals, and orthodox evangelicals.³

Further compounding this tangling diversity is the academic atmosphere they criticize as un-conducive to scholarly growth. They noted that the energies of a small number of evangelical scholars are diffused by a polarity between academic commitments and congregational engagements; thus resulting in a “contemporary malaise in evangelical theology.”⁴

This malaise, unless overcome by a well-focused and wholehearted scholarly endeavor, could hinder the formulation of definitive evangelical theological framework. The absence of distinct conceptual framework amid academic malaise and ecclesial confusion could spontaneously threaten the evangelical identity. This could be a theological risk to what is generally considered as integrative missional movement that has globally proliferated. Without definitive theological framework, mission is not only ironical, but also kerygmatically, ecclesiological, and societally risky. For the theological structures are both the definition and the content of mission.

Theology shapes both the content and function of the church’s proclamation and societal ministry. Further, it shapes not only the ecclesial mission but also the nature of ecclesial life. A theological problem would have a corresponding ecclesiological problem, and vice versa. Thus Beaton identifies the evangelical problem as ecclesologically rooted. He sees that, “evangelicalism is in the throes of identity crisis, and at the heart of the crisis is a lack of clarity concerning the nature and function of the

³ Mark Noll, Cornelius Platinga, Jr., and David Wells, “Evangelical Theology Today,” *Theology Today* 51 (January 1995): 495.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 501. Thus Williams talks of the renewal of evangelicalism in relation to the retrieval of evangelical tradition. See D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

church.”⁵ Mouw also sees evangelicalism as operating in a weak ecclesiology⁶ Thus Stackhouse stresses:

When the church is confused about who it is and whose it is, it can become just another institution, just another collective, just another voluntary society. So we need ecclesiology—the doctrine of the church—to clarify our minds, motivate our hearts, and direct our hands. We need ecclesiology so that we can be who and whose we are.⁷

Hindmarsh further observes a complication in evangelicalism in his characterization of evangelical movement as “always a restless ‘movement,’ iconoclastic of all forms of order, often guilty of schism, and in danger of turning the proclamation of the eternal gospel into matters of popular suasion and the politics of public personalities.”⁸ This restlessness could be rooted in a lack of explicit theological and ecclesiological framework that could provide distinct identity and direction to ecclesial life and ministry.

Evangelicalism could not just remain surfing over a crowd of distinct ecclesial identities,⁹ for oftentimes, these entities are exclusivistic, divisive and fragmentary—characteristics contradictory to the unifying nature of evangelicalism. Further, not only

⁵ Richard Beaton, “Reimagining the Church: Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?*, ed. John Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 217.

⁶ Richard J. Mouw, “Evangelicals in Search of Maturity,” *Theology Today* 35 (April 1978): 32. Mouw identifies this ecclesiological weakness as caused by evangelicalism “not being an organized movement but a *de facto* coalition.” *Ibid.*, 35. Grenz adds, “Evangelicalism’s parachurch ethos work against the ability of the movement to develop a deeply rooted ecclesiological base from which to understand its own identity and upon which to ground its mission, whether it sees that mission as being as, to, or on behalf of the body of Christ.” Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 290.

⁷ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “Preface,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Stackhouse, 9.

⁸ Bruce Hindmarsh, “Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron?: A Historical Perspective,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Stackhouse, 36. Thus the compilation of essays edited by Wells and Woodbridge talk about evangelical identity and its evolution; see David F. Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1975).

⁹ The work edited by Stackhouse (ref. *Evangelical Ecclesiology*), resulting from the 2002 Theological Conference in Regent College, is indicative of lack of definitive evangelical ecclesiology. Evangelical ecclesiology is portrayed as surfing over varied established ecclesiological traditions.

are academic endeavors necessitated, but evangelical theological-ecclesiological construction should also be biocentric. As McGrath challenges, “Perhaps the greatest challenge the evangelicalism in the next generation is to develop an increasing intellectual commitment without losing its roots in the life and faith of ordinary Christian believer.”¹⁰

Moreover, the denominationally transcending nature of evangelicalism implies theological and ecclesiological formulations that are also denominationally transcending yet unifying. Bloesch recognizes the “need for a catholic evangelicalism that will maintain continuity not only with the heritage of the Reformation but also with the whole catholic heritage.”¹¹

Snyder sounds this call:

Today evangelical ecclesiology is (as usual!) in a major transition. Precisely for that reason, it faces a large opportunity. What better time to elaborate an ecclesiology that is soundly biblical and evangelical, prophetic and movemental, theologically coherent and sociologically aware, and functional for effective witness to the kingdom of God in an age of rapid globalization.¹²

Statement of the Problem. Thus this work attempts to address the following problems in Contemporary Evangelicalism:

1. The ambiguity of its identity and theological structures.
2. The need to identify its ecclesiological structures.
3. The confusion of its ecclesiological identity.

The Theses. In spite of the aforementioned problems, it is, however, perceived that:

1. The phenomenon of Contemporary Evangelicalism could be definitively

¹⁰ McGrath, *A Passion for Truth*, 243.

¹¹ Donald G. Bloesch, *God, Authority, and Salvation*, 21.

¹² Howard A. Snyder, “The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Stackhouse, 103.

characterized and its theological structures could also be identified.

2. That there is an apparent ecclesiological framework profoundly embedded in Contemporary Evangelicalism.
3. And Contemporary Evangelicalism has its own distinct ecclesial identity that could be, generally, ecclesologically paradigmatic.

The Importance of the Study. Therefore, this work is very important because it will attempt to address the aforementioned problems and prove the aforementioned thesis about Contemporary Evangelicalism. This will attempt to present:

1. The definitive identity and structures of Contemporary Evangelical theology
2. The distinct framework of Contemporary Evangelical ecclesiology.
3. To present the very identity of Contemporary Evangelical ecclesiology in particular, and as paradigmatic of the identity of the Christian church in general.

Methodology. A literary study will be conducted on literatures dealing with the structures of Contemporary Evangelical theology and ecclesiology. These literatures will be, of course, contemporary to the theological endeavors on Contemporary Evangelicalism. This work will analyze and expound the implications of the phenomenon and structures of evangelicalism with the intention of constructing a fresh yet holistic, synthesizing, and integral theological and ecclesiological perspectives on Contemporary Evangelicalism.

Delimitation and Conclusion. This work is not intended to expound the details of the plethora of what has been regarded as sources of evangelical ecclesiological heritage. Rather, this work focuses on an attempt to characterize the phenomenon and theological-

ecclesiological structures of Contemporary Evangelicalism, and point out its core intent for the whole Christian church.

McGrath predicts that the “debate over evangelical identity is likely to remain a subject of debate and discussion,”¹³ and this work will attempt to make apparent the identity of Contemporary Evangelicalism.

It is foreseen that this work could bring about a new theological and ecclesiological perspective inherent in Contemporary Evangelicalism. In fact, such perspective is foreseen as paradigmatic of a New Reformation!

¹³ Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 22.