

## CTS Lecture Notes on Evangelical Theology

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During the Renaissance, scholars and thinkers began to question the accuracy of official church traditions, which opened the door for the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s.

They tended to stop at the Bible, however, so Protestants remained fairly comfortable. During the European Enlightenment of the 1600s and 1700s, scholars and thinkers began to turn the same critical attitude to the Bible.

Some Christians rejected and denounced this as Godless. Many remained blissfully unaware.

Other Christians (mostly Protestants) accepted this as a natural consequence of their own revolt against authoritarianism. They began to search for ways to reformulate the core of their faith in ways that would not conflict with contemporary scholarship. These later became known as liberals.

Some Christian liberals became so accommodating that they wound up uncritically celebrating their contemporary middle-class culture at the expense of having anything distinctive of their own to say.

Almost all theological movements of the 1900s began as a corrective to this uncritical identification of Christianity with Euro-American bourgeois culture. Evangelicalism is one of these movements, but not the only one.

Revivalistic Christians did not pay attention to any of this until the late 1800s and early 1900s. When they finally took notice, many of them repudiated both critical scholarship and any form of Christianity that had tried to live with such scholarship.

Thus arose the fundamentalist movement, which later gave rise to evangelicalism.

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Now, to shift gears, I want to couch much of this lecture in a narrative vein and explain how an originally liberal Southern Baptist once became more theologically conservative than most CTS students, only to wind up looking in some ways even more liberal than many of you.

If you consider yourself liberal I hope to give you more appreciation for conservative evangelical approaches and others like them.

If you consider yourself evangelical I hope to make it clearer why many faithful Christians cannot in good conscience accept some of the more grandiose views of the Bible.

But I also want you to see that there are many varieties of evangelical theology today, and that you can be both evangelical and ecumenical at the same time.

Indeed, if “evangelical” means “focused on the Gospel,” you already know I would contend that there is a sense that all of us should strive to be ecumenically evangelical.

As some of you know, for me this story began with my friendship with Paige Patterson, who recently became the President of the Southern Baptist Convention and sponsor of the new amendment to its doctrinal statement calling on wives to “graciously submit” to their husbands. Long before that he was my pastor and a most influential mentor.

By the time I met Patterson I had become practically a walking caricature of modernism.

That is, I assumed that the history of the human race (the ascent of “man”) could be told objectively in terms of a long journey of progress from darkness to increasing light, with Western-white-male scientists, philosophers and educators leading the way.

I had learned of the Scopes trial from watching *Inherit the Wind*, and it went without saying that Clarence Darrow represented the forces of light while William Jennings Bryan represented the forces of darkness and superstition.

I assumed that defenders of biblical inerrancy were the clear losers, a vanishing species waiting out their waning days huddled in trailer parks, afraid to read or listen to anybody who did not share their views.

So, imagine my shock when in Patterson I first got to know a highly educated conservative evangelical, a card-carrying member of the Creation Research Society *and* the American Academy of Religion, a person who really believed that he could be “raptured” right out of his car at any moment, yet who peppered his highly charged evangelistic appeals with intriguing, if unflattering, allusions to existentialism, Wittgenstein, logical positivism, neo-orthodoxy, Whitehead, and the like.

My world view of universal progress could not explain him.

I’d had earlier prejudices exposed for what they were. But before meeting Patterson this process had always reinforced an uncritical trust in public education and scholarship. (No doubt my father’s position as a professor of education at a state university had much to do with that.)

I had assumed until then that it was fairly easy to pick out the most intelligent, least prejudiced people from the dullards and bigots, but with Patterson and the books he started lending me I began to realize that the distinction was not so easy to draw.

This was only complicated further after I had a rather profound religious experience sparked by a conversation with Patterson. On the verge of leaving my church, I decided to explain to him why I no longer felt at home there. He was surprisingly gracious in the face of my skepticism, lending me several books and encouraging me to return for more conversation.

Within a week I had undergone something of a religious awakening. While reading the Gospel of John, I began to see that there was something about God’s self-giving in Jesus Christ that made deeper, if somewhat more mysterious, sense than any generic brand of religion could ever hope to make.

Scripture had come alive for me in a way that it never had before, and I was utterly convinced that this was no less than God’s doing and that I was being summoned to share this experience with others.

Mind you, I never did go so far as to say that followers of other religions were damned unless they converted. My position then was closer to the inclusivism of Justin Martyr and Karl Rahner, and Patterson and I always maintained a friendly disagreement about that.

Nevertheless, I began to see more legitimacy to Patterson’s emphasis on having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” And I began, however grudgingly, to respect his ways of thinking.

Just as importantly, I also became convinced that God had spoken to me through those passages I had been reading, and that meant I was going to have to rethink my attitude toward the Bible and the concept of revelation.

Two of the books Patterson had lent me were Francis Schaeffer's *Escape from Reason* and Clark Pinnock's *Set Forth Your Case*.<sup>1</sup> (Pinnock, I later learned, was Patterson's favorite mentor in seminary.)

Both books were attacks on what the authors perceived to be a subjectivism and relativism run rampant in secular culture, in liberal and neo-orthodox theology, and even in some strains of evangelicalism, that could only result in a nihilistic celebration of irrationalism. Schaeffer even had the gall (in 1968!) to cite Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* in making his point.<sup>2</sup>

I was not quite sure what all those terms meant, or who people with names like Kierkegaard and Jaspers were, but I was beginning to get the general drift.

What impressed me then were especially three things.

**First**, these writers were calling for more critical reflection, not less, and definitely not intellectual retreat or compromise. I had not met anybody else who seemed willing to face the intellectual challenges to faith head-on.

All the ministers and churchgoers I knew then seemed to prefer appeals to feeling over everything else. What distinguished liberals from conservatives was that the liberals' feelings felt nicer and were calculated not to conflict with any other beliefs about reality.

Now here, finally, were people insisting that we could not shirk critical reflection on even our most cherished sentiments. And they connected their insistence directly to a defense of biblical inerrancy and "propositional revelation." It was not from Clark Williamson but from Clark Pinnock that I first heard the challenge,

"The Christian gospel pleases both heart and head. It is a rational and intelligent faith. Therefore it cannot be presented on the spur of the moment without much reflective thought, in the spouting of proof texts and an appeal to religious excitement in the soul."<sup>3</sup>

Nobody else I knew or read (at least no other Christians) seemed interested in calling for the intellectual courage these writers demanded. How could I not be attracted?

The **second** thing that appealed to me (I recall mentioning this to Patterson) was these writers' critique of the pretense of religious neutrality, whether couched in terms of reason or experience.

Such pretenses, they insisted, could be shown to be disguised assertions of authority on behalf of oneself or one's group. They amounted to a promotion of oneself or one's group to something like divine status.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968); Clark H. Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case: An Examination of Christianity's Credentials* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971)—first published in 1967.

<sup>2</sup> See Schaeffer, pp. 69-71.

<sup>3</sup> Pinnock, p. 9.

Only an appeal to something truly transcendent, the inerrant Word of God, could provide the resources to critique such ideological (and idolatrous) moves. Or so they claimed. The *third* thing that impressed me, this time more grudgingly, was a portrait that these writers and Patterson sketched of half-hearted liberal Christians who still looked to Scripture for some sort of guidance, yet who were determined to dismiss as erroneous anything found in Scripture which did not support the convictions they already held. That sounded a bit like me, at least some of the time. And when the attitude was described in so many words it appeared utterly ludicrous. Why look to Scripture at all if you did not want it to speak with a voice different from your own?

These arguments, along with the critical stance these writers defended, were so striking that I had to take their position with utter seriousness, and all the more so when at the end of that week it did seem that Scripture had spoken to me with a voice of its own to challenge some of my views about God's relation to us.

And so it was not too surprising that within a year's time I had cast my lot with what Donald Bloesch later aptly called the "evangelical renaissance" of the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> Over the previous thirty years the heirs of fundamentalism had decided that their movement was too anti-intellectual, too suspicious of scholarship, ecumenism and efforts at social improvement.

They had issued, in effect, a call to repentance with the founding of schools like Fuller Theological Seminary and periodicals like *Christianity Today*.

I followed the movement with interest and wrote my senior honors thesis on some crucial issues in evangelical theology.

Here is how I described evangelicals back then (1976):

[The term "evangelical"] is somewhat ambiguous, mainly because it has been used to identify a great number of religious movements, many of which seem unrelated. In this case I am referring to a theological orientation which in America has its historic roots in the fundamentalism of the first half of this century. But unlike fundamentalism, evangelicalism is characterized by an openness and encouragement of rational discussion and dialogue with other points of view. The evangelical is confident that intellectual honesty in search of truth cannot damage any beliefs that are worth believing, and that it is quite possible to adhere to a rather traditional interpretation of Christianity without sacrificing or limiting the intellect. This attitude of openness is combined with a sincere desire to seek out a more catholic expression of the Christian faith which transcends denominational divisions ... Consequently, many who have now allied themselves with evangelicalism were never associated with fundamentalism; this is particularly true of evangelicals in countries where there never really was a fundamentalist-modernist controversy comparable to America's.

The label, "evangelical," indicates the central point of interest for this movement—the "evangel," the gospel or good news as confessed by the writers of the New Testament ...

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973)

The central message expressed by the New Testament and subsequent creeds is the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as the risen Christ, the Lord and Savior of humanity, and the exhortation for all to put their ultimate trust in him. Evangelicals reaffirm this message, although they are beginning to recognize room for differences in interpretation. The majority would still subscribe to the five fundamentals of fundamentalism: the inspiration and authority of scripture, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth and miracles of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and the bodily resurrection and personal return of Christ. However, evangelicals who hold to the five fundamentals differ from the fundamentalists in that they recognize them as secondary implications of the central New Testament witness ...

All evangelicals would probably unite in affirming that a list of doctrines such as those found in the fundamentals, or the Apostles' Creed, or other similar confessions are still quite *believable*; in other words, a rational modern man [sic] could believe such doctrines without being intellectually dishonest.<sup>5</sup>

Now back to the present. Today the efforts of evangelicals of the sort I described in 1976 seem to have paid off, at least in the sense that they seem to have carved out an enduring niche in almost every academic organization and public institution.

The establishment of a chair in evangelical theological studies at Harvard Divinity School is only one example of this.

From Patterson's perspective, however, most of these evangelicals have already sold out, and few of them would be able to gain or hold a teaching position at his seminary, which in academic circles is not held in the same high regard as these scholars are.

Patterson and his most trusted colleagues tend to represent Gabriel Fackre's categories of "fundamentalist evangelicals" and "old evangelicals," while the contributors to today's reading tend to represent Fackre's "new evangelicals" and "justice and peace evangelicals" and at least some "charismatic evangelicals." You'll find this newer group well represented in *Sojourners* magazine.

Most of the newest generation of evangelicals have abandoned a strict view of biblical inerrancy in favor of a number of more modest and nuanced views of biblical authority. Scripture is not so much a criterion of theological truth as it is a means of grace.

Theories of inspiration matter less than the practice of reading Scripture, in community with others, to find one's life illuminated and instructed by the Spirit.

So interestingly, approaches of this newer generation of evangelicals begin to look more and more like other approaches, like that of Karl Barth, whom we'll read next week.

While I am no longer one of them, I find these evangelicals to be interesting conversation partners. They are trying to articulate the Gospel ecumenically, as well as evangelically, and I have no doubt that I will continue to learn from them.

I want to encourage those of you who call yourselves evangelicals to take them as your mentors.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles W. Allen, "Miracles, History and Rational Belief," unpublished honors thesis, University of Arkansas, 1976, pp. 2-4.

I wish I could be as encouraging about Patterson's brand of evangelicalism, with his strict view of biblical authority, but I must confess that I can't. And I want to give you some idea of why I think a doctrine like biblical inerrancy to be counterproductive—and not very faithful to the Gospel.

Maybe it will help once again to get more autobiographical.

Ironically, all of the points that impressed me so much from reading Schaeffer and Pinnock conspired to undercut biblical inerrancy as the proposed solution to relativism and idolatry.

The doctrine, I eventually concluded, could not survive an intellectually honest examination.

Its defenders raised the burden of proof to the contrary so high that no questions raised could ever count against it.

They diverted attention from such questions by attacking and misrepresenting the motives of the questioner, without looking very carefully at their own.

The doctrine began to look suspiciously like an *a priori* principle imposed on Scripture, not derived from it.

And its defenders could not give a satisfactory account of the all-to-human process of canonization.

On top of that, their disagreements even among themselves indicated that they listened to Scripture just as selectively as any half-hearted liberal.

So not only was the doctrine difficult to sustain intellectually, but practically speaking it appeared powerless to deliver us from the sorts of idolatrous self-promotion that its defenders so ably detected in everybody else.

It began to seem that, if everybody else was as hopelessly mired down as they claimed, then by all indications, if held to the same standards, inerrantists were in much the same position.

This could have been a counsel of utter despair if I had not questioned the assumption that everybody else was so hopelessly mired down. But fortunately that is what I began to do at about the same time.

In conversation with Christians from other traditions and schools of thought, and less frequently with people of other religious outlooks, I began increasingly to sense how all of us were trying to do justice to our conviction that precisely in and through our own finitude and fallenness (our eccentricity and brokenness) we had been addressed by something immeasurably beyond our own self-interested agendas.

Given the elusiveness of that address, furthermore, it seemed likely that none of us would ever find a fully satisfactory way to give an account of it that does equal justice to God's divinity and our humanity.

Rather than despair at this, I began to conclude that what we needed was instead a healthier sense of mystery about the whole enterprise, and just as importantly, a readiness to see not just ourselves but all sorts of peculiar-seeming people as graciously enabled to provide faithful enough testimonies that together, and only together, we might continue to find ourselves drawn out from where we were toward something incomparably richer. Mired down we might be, but not hopelessly so.

It was in this more conversational direction that I began to move as I went on to seminary and doctoral studies, and where I still find myself today: the most important corrective to our own eccentric and broken insights is not a magical appeal to a book that denies its obvious humanity but a resolve to stay in genuine conversation with others who have just as strong a sense of their own eccentricity and brokenness.

After this and other realizations, some of them quite unsettling, what was left? Here I want to bring the narrative back to the present and say that what was left, what *is* left, is nothing less than the truth of a Gospel that speaks honestly of how our eccentric and broken lives have been embraced by the correspondingly eccentric and broken communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

According to conservative evangelicals, that is not how this narrative is supposed to turn out. My faith should have been getting more diluted, more secularized, at the very least less emphatically Christian.

I am happy to disappoint them. God has not gotten less real. Bearing witness to the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ has not become less important on my agenda, no matter how much I welcome others' differing testimonies on their own terms. Maybe other stories have moved in that direction. This one has not. Or so I claim.

If you want to call yourself evangelical, try recovering its original meaning, as other evangelical scholars are now doing. Don't look for magical trump cards. Stay focused on the Gospel. And stay in conversation.