

Understanding Other Religions From a “Conservative Evangelical” Point of View

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There certainly is what may be described as a conservative evangelical theology of mission. It is widely accepted in a readily identifiable segment of the world Christian community. Unfortunately, this theology of mission has not been fully and carefully explicated in any orderly form. Consequently, it has not been subjected to thorough critical examination. It has been acted upon in an admirable, but rather unquestioning, faith by the aggressive missionary forces identified by ambiguous labels such as fundamentalist, or conservative evangelical. What may be described, as theology of mission is the most nearly common element of astoundingly diverse, and often mutually antagonistic variations in doctrinal interpretation.

With IFMA-EFMA grouped somewhere near the middle, there is a range from marginal gospel preaching sects through separatist groups to those within ecumenically oriented churches, or other non-aligned but recognizable historical organizations, which adhere to a conservative theological persuasion. The differences within this continuum are usually identified as theological. They focus on such issues as:

- The character and purity of the church, as well as its ministry and ordinances;
- Experiential aspects of both the saving and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit;
- Assurance of salvation and the “security of the believer;”
- The nature of inspiration of Scripture;
- Varying methodology in hermeneutics;

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- Certain aspects of the doctrines of election and atonement;
- The second coming of our Lord, along with a multiplicity of eschatological details.

Insistent emphasis on these and related issues has resulted in tragic, and even ludicrous, fragmentation and multiplication of organizations. However, in my opinion, there would be general consent within the extremes of this differentiation on the central elements of theology of mission.

I suspect I will serve best, in seeking to fulfill this assignment, by first trying to set out the presuppositions of such a theology of mission, which are important for this discussion. Then I want to attempt to describe the understanding of other religions that seems to characterize this type of Christian faith. Finally, to encourage your reaction and criticism, I want to conclude this brief statement by trying to indicate areas where conservative evangelicals, if they are to be faithful in the service they seek to give the world under explicit Biblical authority, must examine these implications of their theology of mission in order to relate with understanding to those whom they seek to address in mission and evangelism.

I. PRESUPPOSITIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC

The combination of topics in the first two announcements of the program seem to me to show that our secretary has healthy theological reflexes. Our “understanding of other religions” is determined by the way we see them in the light of our theological perspectives. The term “theology” may be serviceable here, but it leaves a paper writer a bit in the dark when his piece must be written in advance of any chance to hear the other papers read. In any case, to me, the second topic, “theology of religions,” may be taken to mean the judgment we make of the religions, and the attitude we have toward them and their adherents on the basis of our particular theology of mission. Such a topic could, of course, lead one to seek to explore ways in which God may be regarded as directly present and at work in the world of the other religions. In fact, I have hopefully anticipated that Father Mueller would grapple with this issue which has been prominent in Roman Catholic thought.

All that I will seek to do is to set out a series of presuppositions that shape what I regard as the generally accepted conservative evangelical understanding of other religions. I will note six basic issues, with some explanatory comments on each:

A. The Conservative Evangelical View of Biblical Authority

1. In this tradition one's view of Biblical authority is inextricably bound up with convictions about the nature of Scripture itself. In fact, with many, authority is made to rest on the theory of "inerrancy in the original documents." This very high—or very limited (!) — view of inspiration almost logically requires that the final truth about God is only given here in the Bible. In the Christian scriptures, and in them alone, is the unique, absolute, and comprehensively authoritative revelation.

2. Another point that is basic to an understanding of the conservative view of Biblical authority is the concept of revelation. Here the claim is made that the essential truth of the Bible, given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is revealed. Revelation is not only personal but propositional. The ultimate and absolute revelation is Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, but the written Scripture through which he is known is also regarded as revelation, which is unique and final. Assertions about "being under judgment of the Word of God" will be references primarily to written Scripture. This kind of concept is assumed when statements are made about "an essential core of truth," or "simple, basic facts of the Gospel." Such expressions may seem ambiguous to those who do not consider that the Bible contains statements of revealed truth. Emphasis on this point is not to indicate that those who have such a view of revelation do not recognize the sense in which the acts of God, as given in Biblical history, may be seen as revelatory. Revelation as mentioned here is in God's person, in his acts, but also in his inscripturated words. The message of the Gospel comes to have a quality of absoluteness about it that is similar to that which may be properly claimed for the Lord and Savior to whom it witnesses.

B. The Conservative Evangelical View of Christ as Savior

1. In general there is reluctance toward the notion that Christ may be at work and be known apart from and outside of the redemptive history disclosed in the Bible. This is because of the concept of revelation noted above. While you can believe the written Word without knowing the living Christ, it must be asked if it is possible to know the living Christ apart from the written Word.

2. The same kind of presupposition will allow for agreement with the idea that all who are saved are saved through Christ. But conservative evangelicals will object if it is proposed that such salvation can take place without "hearing" of him on whom men must believe.

3. It will be insisted that Scripture does not allow for an optimistic universalism that sees all men as ultimately saved. However, many conservative evangelicals will affirm that the provision of the atonement is universal, but that the “good news” about it has to be received in order for its benefits to be appropriated.

C. Conservative Evangelical Eschatology

1. Though there is divergence here on many points that are considered very important, one uniform and urgent point of agreement is that men who have not personally responded to God through hearing his Word are lost now and will stand under judgment in the age to come. This is probably the distinguishing evangelical note in a discussion of this sort. Speculation about truth, or value, or beauty in other religions has only theoretical significance if the real issue is whether a person is saved or lost.

- A. I want to believe that along with a serious view of “discontinuity” there is also a kind of hopeful adherence to a concept of “fulfillment.” This is in view of the fact that man in his “dialectical condition,” if I may put such words in a conservative evangelical mouth, is still in God’s image and has in him that potential for God and good which is only fully realizable through new life in Christ.
- B. Kraemer is the most eloquent exponent of a kind of noble defense that is needed by those of us who seek to insist on the uniqueness and finality of Christ and the Gospel. Surely Kraemer has made the point that it is no arrogance, intolerance, or proud exclusiveness to make such a claim, when it is insisted that those who bear the Gospel not only have received it as God’s gift in revelation but have experienced its saving power.
- C. There are two points at which the conservative evangelical goes beyond Kraemer in the matter of discontinuity. The first, as has been noted, is that revelation is regarded as propositional, as well as personal. This does make it more difficult to say “a fierce no” to non-Christian religions.
- D. The second point is one on which Kraemer and others who share his views to some extent are strangely silent. It is the question of the consequence of not knowing the truth as it is in Christ. The conservative evangelical has

the agonizing judgment to make that such a person is not only in error in adhering to religion that is merely a natural and human construction, but that he is lost forever.

- E. Conservative evangelicals do recognize beauty, truth, and value in non-Christian religions, but never as a source of saving truth. These are there because of the work of creation. But they are inevitably impaired because of man's sin.
- F. There is increasing emphasis in these circles on the necessity to seek for communication in personal terms, rather than in comparison and confrontation of religious systems. Many examples of notable failure in this area could, of course, be recounted.
- G. Conservative evangelicals have been quite open and creative in seeking to make the Gospel linguistically relevant, and to encourage an indigenous expression of the life of a church in the culture where it bears its witness. However, they have probably been much too hesitant in seeking to learn by listening in dialogue with non-Christians. This kind of study and exchange can not only make possible deeper communication with them in witness, but enable Christians themselves to more fully understand their own faith.
- H. The emphasis on faith as personal and individual is frequently criticized, but it is essential to the conservative evangelical view. It is inconceivable in these terms that one should be a Christian without knowing it and without some awareness of repentance toward God. It is even less reasonable to classify people as Christians whose basic beliefs are in contradiction to Biblical faith.
- I. It seems a misunderstanding of both sin and grace to seek to maintain that because people in other religions "do good" or "have truth" they are therefore saved, and perhaps should be called "Christian pagans."
- J. Most conservative evangelicals conceive of revelation as general or natural and special. But they would acknowledge that the revelation of God in nature and

conscience only evidences man's condemnation and never results in salvation.

If religion is not true in the light of Biblical norms, or if it is merely nominal or traditional, the conservative evangelical can only regard it, in the light of his eschatology, as a dangerous and damnable error.

D. The Conservative Evangelical View of Man

1. The way in which man has been affected by sin would not, in the view of most conservative evangelicals, have completely effaced the image of God in which he was created.

2. The effects of sin and the continuing influence of Satan, the god of this world, is such that man will never seek God on his own and can only respond to him as a result of the beneficent and gracious drawing of the Holy Spirit.

E. The Conservative Evangelical View of Salvation

1. Salvation is the gracious work of God for man and in him. It is given to man in grace and never in consideration of any good he might do.

2. A strong conservative evangelical emphasis in relation to salvation is that it always involves a word that comes to man from God, and almost without exception through some human witness.

F. The Conservative Evangelical View of the Church

1. The whole question of how God is receptively at work in the world where the Church is not present and the Gospel has not yet come is one on which conservative evangelicals will be reticent to speak. This is because the Bible is hardly explicit on this matter. Moreover, the New Testament emphasis is surely on the Church not only as the goal, but the instrument of the work of redemption.

2. Perhaps the strongest single theme in a conservative evangelical proclamation is that personal response to Christ in faith incorporates a person into the Church, the body of Christ. There are many points at which conservative evangelicals suffer sad defects in their lack of awareness and neglect of implication of the doctrine of the Church. But on one point especially they are insistent. There is a clear distinction between those who are in the Church and those who are not. To be in a religion other than the

Christian faith and to profess or to be claimed for membership in Christ's Church is a contradiction in terms.

II. THE CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER RELIGIONS

Probably the way in which religion is understood within this theological tradition is already quite clear. It might be appropriate to enumerate under this heading some points that must be carefully considered if one is to understand the conservative evangelical viewpoint, which does in many ways seem narrow and arrogant. Probably any of these points, with minor modifications, will be found within traditions that might acknowledge being "evangelical," but not in the contemporary combination with "conservative." However, it is important to note the way in which these points are correlated and inter-dependent within conservative evangelical doctrinal structures.

- A. In terms of the classical categories of definition of the relation of Christian faith to other faiths, the conservative evangelical would hold to "discontinuity." While such a view as Kraemer's would be the most acceptable theological explanation, the attitude of "radical displacement" is often in evidence among us.

These points then summarize the conservative evangelical understanding of other religions. Those who give their devotion to gods other than the God and Father of Jesus Christ are lost. They are outside of Christ and his Church. They need to be lovingly and winsomely presented with the saving gospel of the cross through which they can be drawn to find new life in him. This is not to say that Christians are better people, or even do more good than those who are not. Nor is it to affirm that just because people call themselves Christians and believe Christian doctrines that they are necessarily in the Church. The fact that people can be so aware of Christian truth and even profess to seek to adhere to its ethical standards still does not insure that they are genuinely Christian. This should cause us to be cautious in concluding that those in other religions who manifest truth and goodness must therefore be people of true faith. It is by grace alone, through personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ, that men have new life. It is our task to make the message as clear and plain as possible, with a sense of urgency appropriate to a saving mission. Having done that, we must leave the rest with God. We can be sure that the Judge of the whole earth will do right. We may be surprised

to find out ultimately that God has included some whom we might have counted out. In that case, we may be like the Scotch preacher who was sure that God would forgive him if he preached free grace to the non-elect.

III. PROBLEMS FOR THE CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL UNDERSTANDING OF OTHER RELIGIONS

This last section is a critique of the point of view described in the paper. It is written with frankly acknowledged loyalty, but also with the ready admission that conservative evangelical attitudes and activities are frequently inconsistent with the truth to which we profess to be committed. In order to stay within limits of time and space, I will just list here a series of “problems.” These may be seen as problems I have as a conservative evangelical, or problems, which I see in the position of “the brethren” with whom I am in very large measure in agreement.

- A. *The only incredibility of such a belief for modern man:* This view, that Christ is the only way to life in God, that there is “none other name” through which man can be saved, is not a very comfortable one to acknowledge, much less to commend to thinking people today. No person who is sensitive and compassionate can consent to such a truth without deep distress and searching questions. How can a God of love condemn any of his creatures, and particularly those who have had no opportunity even to learn of his grace and judgment? There is something here that appears to so-called “man come of age” to be not only unconscionably intolerant but immoral. It is discomfiting to get a barrage from Professor Macquarrie who sites “common sense” as the overwhelming argument against such a belief.
- B. *The partialness of Biblical teaching on this matter:* Of course, the answer to scientifically sophisticated and secular questions is “the Bible says ...” But this answer is not without some problems in itself. We do have to ask what the Bible does really say about “other” religions. Then we must go on to ask how explicitly do such pronouncements and their implications apply in our day. Allowance must be made for the fact that the Bible is “all so partial.” It does have a kind of Mediterranean limitation and does not speak directly to the Yangtze or the Ganges, or one

could add to the Thames or the Mississippi. The kind of study that will shortly be published by Professor Hein from Yale will speak to this issue. However, conservative evangelicals have been slow to recognize this kind of limitation in Scripture and to cope with it in their exegesis and interpretation.

- C. *The necessity to limit the extent of the claim of uniqueness:* Evangelicals have been fearfully careless in maintaining the unqualified exclusiveness of their message. They appear to do this without making any serious effort to distinguish between Christianity and Biblical faith. Surely not every thing called Christian, or related to Christianity, is unique or absolute. We must certainly agree with Kraemer, Latourette, and others that Christianity is an empirical, historically developing religion threatened with all of the weaknesses and evil present in any human institutional development. Our problem is, how can we affirm that the only true revelation of God has come to be expressed through the Christian religion, and at the same time make clear that the complex and varied phenomenon that is called Christianity is in very large measure a product of culture?
- D. *What is "faith" in Biblical terms?* There is a kind of ambiguity—though it may well be a purposeful ambiguity—in the way in which the term faith is used in Scripture. Herein another problem arises. When we speak of Biblical faith, do we mean a body of beliefs, as the "faith once delivered"? Probably it would be agreed that the predominant meaning of faith would be obedient belief or response to God in personal relationship. These two basic aspects of faith as experience and faith as truth seem to be inextricably bound together in Scripture. However, it is evident that the personal existential aspect is primary. Looking at faith in this sense, we see striking dissimilarities and variations in the experience of men of faith through out the ages. One thing, at least, is constant. That is faith is always response to God's grace. But here is another variable. The truth by which man is informed of the summons to encounter and have acquaintance with God cannot be encapsulated as a neat uniform message with unchanging content through the whole of redemptive

history. Does this not say something significant to our claim about the fixed phrasing of the saving Gospel?

- E. *The danger of an intellectualist distortion of faith:* This is a point at which the conservative view is vulnerable. The strong emphasis on propositional revelation allows for an intellectualistic formulation of the Gospel. This can result in a kind of idolatry of ideas, as though it were the impeccability of one's doctrinal views, which yields a real knowledge of God. We must be warned of the danger of over-intellectualizing faith, but we cannot consent to the notion that the absolute revelation of God in Jesus Christ is completely dissociated from any message that comes from God as his word.
- F. *The meaning of "none other name:"* It is proper to relate the Romans 10 passage, "How shall they call on him of whom they have not heard," to the need for urgency in the mission of saving men "through faith in his name." Nevertheless, we must ask, are there not people who knew God through faith who never heard of Jesus. I think we can assert that many were saved before he lived on earth and was identified by that name. This is not an attempt to find false hope for those who have not heard, nor to give comfort to those who are unconcerned about reaching them. The intent of the question is to raise the point: What has to be believed in order to be saved? And, even more important, is belief all that is needed?
- G. *Where in the world is God at work, and how:* As has already been acknowledged, this matter, which gets so much space in current literary theology, touches on what has been a continuing problem in evangelical missionary thought. It is recognized that God is at work, in some sense, in the world outside the sphere of Gospel influence. It is a profound truth that God in sovereignty and providence created his world and now sustains and controls it through the course of history. But it is the question of redemptive work in men as individuals that needs careful consideration. Many speak of the teaching of Calvin concerning "the seed of religion" and the "sense of divinity" which is present in all men. Bavinck alludes to this as the missionary "starting point." The missionary does not

open the dialogue between God and his listeners. He merely opens a new chapter. There is an amazing element of mystery here about man who is “without God.” But the other side of this problem is the sober truth that, as Bavinck says in agreement with Calvin, there is not a single man in whom the seed of religion comes to maturity.”

- H. *Judgments about final judgment*: Conservative evangelicals have been too harsh and frequently inadequately informed when they have carelessly condemned too many people as “universalists.” It is true that the motive behind these severe charges is basically zeal for truth. To compromise the judgment aspect of God’s message may well be to preach “another gospel.” But surely Christian fellowship and service in evangelism should not be based on any precise delineation of a doctrine of hell. Nonetheless, it does certainly change the purpose and motive of evangelism if the decision that is called for is a matter of indifference. The problem with this kind of eschatological emphasis is that the missionary motive may become a kind of heavenly humanitarianism, rather than service given for the primary purpose of glorying God.
- I. *Some general criticisms*: Perhaps before concluding it should be acknowledged that conservative evangelicals do create some other distinct problems for themselves by their narrow and limited theology of mission. In the priority they give to saving men for the next life, they have tragically neglected the social implications of the Gospel for their present service in the world. In their insistence on the uniqueness of their own faith, they have neglected and denigrated the religious faiths of those they seek to evangelize, and frequently regard them not only as worthless, but completely demonic. In trying to keep the Gospel pure and the Church true, they have refused to fellowship even with those whom they acknowledge to be with them in Christ. Their lack of concern for the expression of their unity in Christ has greatly limited the effectiveness of their witness. A good note to stop on is that conservative evangelicals have been impoverished because they have allowed themselves to be isolated from the enrichment and discipline that could have resulted from a direct and creative relationship, even though it

involved elements of tension with those who do not share their concept of evangelism and mission. Moreover, the truth they do have and live by might make a contribution toward strengthening, and perhaps even correcting, some who are reluctant toward them and their view of truth. Doubtless, this would be true about many areas of thought and action. But perhaps it is especially applicable in the matter of the understanding of other religions.



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