

An Evangelical Perspective on Church and Mission

Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.

It is with genuine appreciation that I have been invited by Canon Mark Oxbrow to set forth an Evangelical perspective on Church and Mission to this session of the Lausanne – Orthodox Initiative. And it is with considerable apprehension on my part that I have accepted this late invitation. Three factors make this assignment difficult for me. The first is that for the past 30 years, I have spent much of my ecumenical energy developing closer relationships between Catholics and Pentecostals.¹ This has obvious implications because Catholics and Pentecostals have confronted one another in Latin America for a century, often competing with and condemning one another, and in the process undermining the message that they both seek to proclaim regarding the saving and reconciling power of Jesus Christ through the cross.²

At the same time, I have worked with Orthodox theologians as a member of the Commissions on Faith and Order in the National Council of Churches in the USA (1984-2002) and the World Council of Churches (1989-Present), as a member of the North American Academy of Ecumenists (1989-Present), and as a member of the Steering Committee of the Global Christian Forum (1998-Present). I was also part of the first conversation held between the Ecumenical Patriarchate and Pentecostals beginning in 2010.

The second difficulty is that I am a Pentecostal by faith, conviction, and experience. While my good friend, Dr. Geoff Tunnicliffe, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance likes to think that he speaks for all Pentecostals because they are simply a subset of Evangelicalism,³ I differ with him on this point. I am not alone.⁴ While Evangelicals and Pentecostals share a number of what may be described as core Evangelical concerns and values, there are also some significant differences between us that sometimes get swept under the carpet when Evangelicals represent Pentecostals – the full working of the Holy Spirit, the place of experience in the Christian life, various worldview questions, the role of women, and the importance of Enlightenment rationalism, just to name a few. I will set your mind at ease, however, and tell

¹ I have served on the steering committee of the International Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue since 1985 (Round 3), and have served as the Pentecostal Co-chair since 1992 (Rounds 4-6). Our reports during my tenure have included “Perspectives on Koinonia” (1989); “Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness,” (1998); “On Becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic Writings with Some Contemporary Reflections” (2008), and “Charisms in the Church: Their Spiritual Significance, Discernment, and Pastoral Implications (anticipate 2015).

²Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. “Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue: Challenges and Lessons for Living Together,” Calvin Smith, Ed. *Pentecostal Power: Expressions, Faith and Politics of Latin American Pentecostalism*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies Series 6 (Leiden, Holland: Brill, 2010), 249-276.

³ When Pope Francis recently apologized specifically to the Pentecostals who make up 70% of the non-Catholic population in Italy, Dr. Tunnicliffe spun the apology by accepting it on behalf of “Evangelicals”. See, “Evangelicals Hail Pope’s Caserta Visit and Apologize to Catholics” released by Vatican Radio July 29, 2014.

⁴ Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (London, England: T & T Clark International, 2004), 1-3; Simon Chan, *Pentecostal Ecclesiology: An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, JPTSupp 38 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2011), 4-6 acknowledges Evangelical roots but clearly sees Pentecostalism as something else; Cephas N. Omenyo, “Pentecostal-Type Renewal and Disharmony in Ghanaian Christianity, in David Westerlund, Ed. *Global Pentecostalism: Encounters with Other Religious Traditions* (London, England: I. B. Taurus, 2009), notes the deep divide between Pentecostals and Evangelicals in Ghana; Douglas Jacobsen, *The World’s Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they got there* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 235-237 notes fuzzy boundaries between these two movements, but clearly distinguishes them from one another.

you that I am not here to set forth a Pentecostal ecclesiology. I will try faithfully to present an honest Evangelical position on “Church and Mission” that I hope Dr. Tunncliffe would affirm.

The third and probably the most significant difficulty lies in the fact that Evangelicalism is neither a church nor a denomination; it is a movement. It crosses many denominational lines. Orthodox Christians understand themselves as belonging to or perhaps constituting the one true Church, with clear lines of apostolic succession, albeit in two families (Eastern and Oriental). At another level and quite useful for some comparisons, it is tempting to describe the Orthodox as a movement comprised of approximately 29 denominations, most of which seem to have a unique national character.⁵ I am fully aware that such a description does not do justice to the Orthodox self-understanding of ecclesiology, so I will not mention it again.

Unlike Orthodox Christianity, it is difficult to categorize Evangelicals in a truly unified and coherent way.⁶ Evangelicalism is a broad Christian movement that tends to defy simple definition. It is made up of Anglican, Reformed, Anabaptist, Pietist, Quaker, Wesleyan, Adventist, Holiness, Pentecostal, and other denominations and parachurch organizations, and evangelicals who maintain membership within historic and mainline denominations, as well as a plethora of congregations including independent house churches, storefront churches, megachurches, non-denominational churches, and emerging and post-denominational churches such as may be found in China. The designation, Evangelical, does not fit all of these groups equally well, but generally these groups do share some important core beliefs and values that make it possible for them to recognize their relative compatibility and at some levels, engage in close fellowship and common witness. I will even dare to say that it is possible to find Orthodox believers who have great sympathy for Evangelicalism, Orthodox believers who might even accept the Evangelical label as it is used regarding some of the individuals and groups represented both within the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century and the subsequent Enlightenment have had profound effects upon Evangelicalism. Among the classic core beliefs that most Evangelicals hold is their commitment to Scripture. It is the inspired, sometimes further delineated as *inerrant* and on other occasions as the *trustworthy* or *infallible* Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). In most cases its role within Evangelicalism is described in statements like the “all sufficient rule

⁵ **[Africa]** African Orthodox Church **[Patriarch of Alexandria]**; Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (Addis Ababa); **[Asia and the Pacific]** Malankara [Jacobite] Syrian Orthodox Church **[Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch]**; Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Kerala); Orthodox Church in Japan (Tokyo) **[Moscow]**; Russian mission in Korea (New York); Greek Archdiocese of North America **[Ecumenical Patriarchate]**; Russian Orthodox mission in China; **[Europe]** Armenian Apostolic Church (Etchmiadzin, Armenia); Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Poland (Warsaw); Bulgarian Orthodox Church (Sophia); Church of Crete **[Constantinople]**; Church of Greece (Athens); Church of Georgia or Georgian Orthodox-Apostolic Church (Tbilisi); Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople; Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania; Orthodox Church in the Slovak Republic; Orthodox Church of Finland (Kaupio) **[Constantinople]**; Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia (Prague); Romanian Orthodox Church (Bucharest); Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow); Serbian Orthodox Church (Belgrade); **[Middle East]** Armenian Apostolic Church (Antelias, Lebanon); Church of Cyprus (Nicosia); Coptic Orthodox Church (Cairo); Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa (Alexandria); Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East (Beirut, Lebanon); Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem (Jerusalem); Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East (Damascus); **[The Americas]** Orthodox Church of America (Syosset, NY).

⁶ See, for instance, Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston, Eds. *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 2-4, 245-272. In the end, the editors found it impossible to agree on a definition.

for faith and practice”.⁷ Indeed, the Reformation commitment to “*Sola scriptura*”, Scripture alone, essentially rejected any role for Tradition, and this commitment to Scripture as “all-sufficient” continues to mark the vast majority of Evangelicals.⁸

In turn, Scripture, the inspired revelation that God has given to humankind, reveals the sinful state of all humankind (Romans 3:23), and thus, the need for our salvation. By means of grace alone, “*Sola gratia*” (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 6:23), God acted on our behalf to restore the relationship between God and the human race that had been broken by our sin. God chose to send His only begotten Son (John 3:16-17), Jesus, to die in our stead. It was a voluntary act on the part of the Son (Philippians 2:6-8) to follow the will of the Father (John 5:30-38; Matthew 26:42), an act that is typically described by most Evangelicals in terms of a substitutionary atonement.⁹ At the same time, while God is the One who extends that grace, many Evangelicals especially those with Wesleyan and Holiness leanings have adopted a more synergistic position here, recognizing a cooperative effort between the Giver and the recipient based upon free choice. The justification that we receive through this substitutionary work comes only through faith, “*Sola fide*” (Romans 1:16-17; Ephesians 2:8-9), not aided by any human effort, restoring us to full and eternal life in God. Our salvation, then, comes only through Jesus Christ, “*Solus Christo*”, who is “the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) and continues to be the one mediator between God and humankind (1 Timothy 2:5).¹⁰

⁷ The World Evangelical Alliance uses the phrase “the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct”. The National Association of Evangelicals in the US stops short of such language, calling the Bible, “the only infallible, authoritative Word of God”. Fuller Theological Seminary’s Statement of Faith (Article 3) describes it as “the only infallible rule of faith and practice”. The Assemblies of God describes it as “the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct”.

⁸ There are exceptions, of course, even in newer denominations such as the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination with 68,000,000 adherents. See, Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “An Emerging Magisterium? The Case of the Assemblies of God,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 25:2 (2003), 164-215 and in Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, Eds. *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Russell P. Spittler*, JPT Supp. 24 (London, England: T. & T. Clark International/Continuum, 2004), 212-252; translated and published as “*Die Entstehung eines kirchlichen Lehramts? Der Fall der Assemblies of God*,” in Jörg Haustein and Giovanni Maltese, Eds. *Handbuch pingstliche und charismatische Theologie* (Göttlingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 160-208.

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, Eds., *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 67-98.

¹⁰ Interestingly, while these commitments of the 16th Century Protestant Reformers are still embraced by Evangelicals, the World Evangelical Alliance does not include this language in its Statement of Faith. See W. Harold Fuller, *People of the Mandate: The Story of the World Evangelical Fellowship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986), 181. The Fellowship has now changed its name to the World Evangelical Alliance, but the Statement is the same. Cf. <http://www.worlddea.org/whoweare/statementoffaith> . Accessed August 27, 2014. These four commitments, however, are spelled out in *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church: A Report by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE)* (London: ACUTE [Paternoster Press], 2001), 10-11 as representing the commitment of many Evangelicals.

While these have been the primary boundary markers¹¹ for Evangelicals since the time of the Protestant Reformation, there are other commitments that most Evangelicals share. Their statements of faith often itemize the various actions that take place in salvation, including repentance, forgiveness, the new birth, conversion, justification, regeneration, adoption, sanctification and so on. Evangelical statements of faith often recognize the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to form the Church. They recognize the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all Christians (Romans 8:9) and the work of the Holy Spirit who enables believers to live lives marked by holiness that provide credible witness to the transformative power of the Gospel. There has been a slow but growing admission of various charisms within Evangelical congregations, though often with limits on more spectacular manifestations (e.g. speaking in tongues, miracles, etc.).¹² Evangelicals also speak quite often of the blessed hope (Titus 2:3), that is, the physical return of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and the resurrection of the dead to face judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10), either to life or to death at the time of His return.

What is most frequently missing from such statements is any clear explication given to ecclesiology. The World Evangelical Alliance, for instance, states only that “We believe in the **Unity** of the Spirit of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ.”¹³ Nothing in these three affirmations, “true believers”, “Church”, and “Body of Christ” is defined, though the adjective “true” certainly raises questions about the nature of believers. While not all Evangelicals would be willing to express their faith in such creedal form, their understanding of the Church would still be expressed in similar terms. It seems clear, therefore that the observation made by the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals in England that “Evangelicalism has been notoriously weak in ecclesiology” is an accurate one, perhaps even an understatement.¹⁴

In order to understand the Evangelical reticence to develop a strong and comprehensive ecclesiology, it is important to acknowledge the role of Pietism in the formation of Evangelical concerns. In 1675, the German Lutheran Pietist, Philipp Jakob Spener, published *Pia Desideria*. Spener was concerned with the lack of spiritual vitality that he observed in the lives of most Christians around him, lay and clergy alike. He began his critique by calling both civil authorities and pastors to account. Changes in their thinking would require significant reform in university and seminary curricula and expectations of personal piety among faculty and students

¹¹ All creedal affirmations result in boundaries. Either one is in or one is out. These particular boundary markers by Reformation era Reformers, as in previous creedal assertions, stood over against prior practice, just as Nicaea stood over and against Arius. With the coming of the Enlightenment, lines were often hardened, and in many respects, Protestants demanded conformity to these markers, and faith became a rational element so that reason defined truth. Protestants, and subsequently Evangelicals have forced their followers to accept Scripture while rejecting Tradition, that is, the magisterium, and in a sense, they have done the same with institutions, favoring the concept of Movement. It must be admitted that Evangelicals, as inheritors of the Reformation boundaries, can at times be highly rationalistic with respect to such rigid doctrinal borders. It is this same commitment to the rationalism extending from the Enlightenment that has often led to suspicion and rejection of the mystical and mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit by many Evangelicals. Thankfully, some of that has begun to change.

¹² I would mark the changes in Evangelical attitudes here with the appearance of the Charismatic Renewal during the 1960s and 70s and especially with the so-called “Third Wave” beginning in the 1980s. There are still many Evangelicals who reject the exercise of certain charisms, Cf. John A. MacArthur, Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992); Michael G. Moriarty, *The New Charismatics: A Concerned Voice Responds to Dangerous New Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 384 pp.; John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2013).

¹³ <http://www.worldeaa.org/whoweare/statementoffaith> . Bold Print is original.

¹⁴ *Evangelicalism and the Orthodox Church*, 32.

alike.¹⁵ Spener maintained that while most laypeople were little more than “nominal Christians”¹⁶ this fact could be overcome should they be taught to develop their knowledge of Scripture.¹⁷ They should be able to bear witness to having had an experience of personal conversion that is lived out in daily life through love.¹⁸ Every Christian should live a life of personal holiness, consistent with biblical norms.¹⁹ Every Christian needs to participate in a community of Christian fellowship, that is, a local congregation of likeminded believers. And every Christian should pass along the Gospel message in word and deed to others.²⁰

There is no question that Spener’s ideas regarding the *individual*, has had a deep impact upon Evangelical Christianity. As a result, Evangelicalism has emphasized the *individual’s* relationship to God as its primary focus, although the individual’s relationship to neighbor (Christian and non-Christian alike) has not been forgotten. Yet for many years the relationship of the *individual* to the *Church* has placed a distant second in Evangelical thought.²¹ That is why the late David Watson, an Evangelical Anglican pastor, wrote in his book, *I Believe in the Church*, that “Christ came to establish a new society on earth. It was not enough for him to call individual sinners to God. He promised that he would build his church.”²²

The Evangelical failure to pay closer attention to the nature of the Church has yielded a number of inconsistencies in Evangelical claims regarding the Church. They can be seen, for instance, in the different ways that Evangelicals govern their church bodies. One can find Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational forms practiced throughout the Evangelical movement, with biblical and theological arguments generated to support each of them.²³ Such ecclesiological diversity was unknown until the post-Reformation era.

When it comes to how one is incorporated into the Church, similar differences pertain.²⁴ While most Evangelicals would insist on repentance and a personal confession of faith in Christ Jesus as sufficient to declare a person “born again” and thus, part of the Church (just think of Billy Graham crusades, for instance), most would also expect baptism to be undertaken shortly thereafter in obedience to Jesus’ command, followed by membership in a local congregation. In this way of thinking, baptism, which is viewed primarily as an *ordinance*, may not be taken seriously enough for it symbolizes little more than an exclamation point on a public decision already taken to follow Jesus. Baptism is viewed as having little or no inherent power to bring about transformation or provide the entry point into the Church.

Other Evangelicals view baptism as a *sacrament* (e.g. Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican, etc.). As a sacrament, baptism is far more than a mere symbol. Baptism is a symbol with power, not something magical, but something through which the grace of God is made manifest to the individual as he or she enters the community of faith, the Church. More often than not such Evangelicals allow for the baptism of confessing believers, but most of them reverse the order in

¹⁵ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, Theodore G. Tappert, Translator and Editor, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1964), 43-56, 103-114.

¹⁶ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 37.

¹⁷ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 87-92.

¹⁸ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 95-97.

¹⁹ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 66-67, 80-86.

²⁰ Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 80, 89-95..

²¹ Basil Meeking and John Stott, *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue in Mission, 1977-1984: A Report* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company /Exeter, England: The Paternoster Press, 1986), 65.

²² David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 39.

²³ Peter Toon, Ed, *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2004).

²⁴ David F. Wright, Ed. *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

the conversion process by embracing infant baptism as a vital, valid, and ancient tradition supported by the household baptismal passages in Acts (16:15, 33-34) and 1 Corinthians (1:16) and a covenantal theology, while anticipating a later, personal confession of faith at the time of confirmation.²⁵

Similarly, while most Evangelicals immerse baptismal candidates following repentance and a confession of faith in keeping with the earliest Christian practice (Acts 2:38) and Anabaptist insistence, others practice affusion, that is, pouring water over candidates,²⁶ and still others practice aspersion or sprinkling.²⁷ Some, such as Friends (Quakers) and the Salvation Army do not use water at all, understanding baptism, possibly in a sacramental way, but only in a spiritual sense.²⁸ So how can such disparate practices be acknowledged and yet those who practice their faith in these very different ways be classed together? And what do Evangelicals actually mean when they confess their belief in “the Church”?

There are several important markers that Evangelicals share when it comes to the doctrine of the Church. First among them is the recognition, one shared with Orthodox Christians, that *there is only one Church*. As David Allan Hubbard, former President of Fuller Theological Seminary observed,

The church is stamped with God’s own character. It is one, because he is one. He has only one mission, only one unified purpose, only one redemptive program, only one human family, and only one society to minister to that family – the one church of the living God “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.... (Ephesians 2:20).²⁹

Such a confession by Evangelicals, however, does not privilege any specific institution, nor does it refer to any single denomination, nor does it necessarily even refer to anything that might be described as an “historical, spatio-temporal community”.³⁰ Evangelicals do not claim that *they are the Church* and since Evangelicalism is a movement of individuals, congregations, organizations, and denominations all of which embrace a Trinitarian Faith and the Lordship of Jesus, it would seem to be inappropriate to claim that Evangelicals *have separated from* the Church. Evangelicals would certainly not make that claim. To make that claim would suggest that Orthodox Christians could not also be Evangelical.

Would it not be fair to affirm that Evangelicals can be part of the Orthodox Church or that the Orthodox Church might be able to affirm many of the core beliefs and values that Evangelicals affirm and claim that they, too, are in some genuine sense Evangelicals? If that is the case, might it not be possible for Evangelicals rightly to claim that *they are part of the Church* rather than being portrayed as *those who have broken from* the Church? For this claim to be recognized, it is

²⁵ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979).

²⁶ This practice may be found in the first half of the Second Century in the Church’s practice, as evidenced in the *Didache* 7.1-4.

²⁷ This mode of baptism is practiced by some Methodists and Reformed Evangelicals.

²⁸ John D. Waldron, *The Quakers and the Salvationists* (Atlanta, GA: The Salvation Army Supplies, 1990), 37-38; R. David Rightmire, *Sacraments and the Salvation Army: Pneumatological Foundations*, Studies in Evangelicalism 10 Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1990.

²⁹ David Allan Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe: Expositions of Christian Doctrine Based on “The Statement of Faith” of Fuller Theological Seminary* (Pasadena, CA : Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), 134.

³⁰ So, for example, in Anna Marie Aagaard and Peter Bouteneff, *Beyond The East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and “the Orthodox Problem”* Risk Book Series (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2001), 23, Peter Bouteneff writes that “For the Orthodox, the total, organic link between Christ and the Church pervades into the institution, the historical, spatio-temporal community”.

clear that Evangelicals and Orthodox Christians must continue to engage in frank and honest discussion, seeking clarification from one another, addressing forthrightly the issues between them, and learning together what it is that brings them together and what each must shed for their relationship to grow.

Clearly, in Evangelical understanding there is no Church apart from God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Most Evangelicals embrace a classical Trinitarian position and the Church is understood to be a gift of God. As John R. Stott noted nearly half a century ago, “The Church is a people, a community of people, who owe their existence, their solidarity and their corporate distinctness from other communities to one thing only – the call of God”³¹. Indeed, it is the Father who has summoned or called the Church into existence (Ephesians 1:3-4, 4:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:2). At the same time, the Church cannot be understood apart from the Son, Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:3). He is the One who has redeemed the Church (Galatians 4:4-5; Titus 2:14). He is the acknowledged Head of the Church (Ephesians 4:15-16; Colossians 1:18), the One who speaks to the Church through the written Word of God (e.g. Revelation 2:1-3:22), the One who provides ongoing direction to the Church through His Spirit (John 14:26; 16:12-14), the one who continually intercedes for His Church (Hebrews 7:25), the One who will return for His Church – a Church without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27). At the same time, it is God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who baptizes believers into Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13), seals them to the day of their redemption (Ephesians 1:13-14), and enables them to live the lives to which they have been called (Galatians 5:16-26). But more than that, the Church is holy precisely because God is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16). The Church is made holy because the Holy Spirit dwells in God’s temple (1 Corinthians 3:16). The Church, therefore, is a product of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Although Evangelicals tend to emphasize the individual, it can be safely affirmed that the Church is not simply the sum of its billions of members. It is something new, a new creation. It is composed of a people who have been called out from the world, made new (2 Corinthians 5:17), and placed into this new thing, the Church, resulting in a new relationship with God, a new relationship with one another (*koinōnia*), and a new relationship to the world, all of which are based upon love (John 14:15; 1 John 2:3, 9-11; 3:1-2a, 18; 4:12). To separate the Church from God or to separate God from the Church is to produce nothing more than a human society that shares some common ideals or a common ideology. Such a society *is not* the Church.

Like Orthodox Christians, Evangelicals would understand the whole People of God as including all those, living and dead, who have placed their faith and hope in the promise of God to provide a way of salvation, which is now fulfilled exclusively in Christ Jesus (Hebrews 11:1-2, 39-40; 12:1-2), “the way the truth and the life (John 14:6). It might also be reasoned in a prophetic or eschatological sense that the communion of saints includes all those who are yet to be called into that fellowship which is the Church. As a result, each member of this “community of saints” is in some sense part of the “Body of Christ”, all those who are “in Christ” (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27) and acknowledge Him as the Head of that Body (Ephesians 4:11-16; 5:23). But here again there is a difference in understanding between the Orthodox Church and Evangelicals. Instead of thinking of the resulting *communio sanctorum* as in some way currently present with us, Evangelicals think of it more as all of whom are in communion with God through Jesus Christ and in that shared communion with God they are also brought into mystical communion with one another, though for the moment at least, many of them have been

³¹ John R. W. Stott, *One People: Laymen and Clergy in God’s Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1968), 15.

separated from one another by the dividing line of death. The full gathering of the communion of saints awaits the eschaton. As a result, Evangelicals do not typically offer prayers to the saints.

The emphasis that Evangelicals have placed upon *individuals* at this point is critical for their understanding of the Church and ultimately for their participation in God's mission (*Missio Dei*). The two actions, (1) repentance with a confession of faith in Jesus Christ and (2) baptism, which typically mark one's conversion and/or entry into the Church, should be congruent with one another. Yet for Evangelicals, genuine conversion is acknowledged only as "the means of entry into the *invisible church* and baptism is typically viewed as the appropriate means of entry into the *visible church*."³² Genuine conversion for most Evangelicals frequently requires specific doctrinal commitments such as "the centrality of the Cross of Christ...the need...of personal conversion, and the place of Scripture as authority."³³ Without these shared commitments, Evangelicals are unwilling to consider others to be Evangelicals of like precious faith (and in some cases, even Christians) and thus, they are frequently unwilling to join hands with other Christians or other Christian groups (churches). Once again, it is important to recognize that in making these doctrinal demands, Evangelicals

do not believe the church to be co-terminus with the visible structure but rather with the community of all those born by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, ultimately known only to God, there is a God-sourced spiritual unity between believers that cannot be achieved by creating structures and organizations.³⁴

Such expectations should not be read as though Evangelicals embrace two entirely different churches – one genuine, the other not. It would be fairer to say that it is more an acknowledgement of two perspectives on the one Church. The whole Church is understood not to be visible to us in that it includes all the faithful who have died, all who are yet alive, and all who are yet to be born (again). In addition, only God can look upon the heart of all and comprehend the integrity of their confession and subsequent actions. As 1 Samuel 16:7 reminds us, "the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."³⁵ And Evangelicals would remind us that the human heart remains duplicitous, or in the words of Jeremiah, "deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9) and as such, only God can truly know those who constitute the one true Church.

At the same time, the Church is clearly visible since those who have made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and been baptized are identifiable by human beings as members of the Church. So here, we may have some difference between Evangelical and Orthodox understandings of the Church. Even so, their understandings may not be so different that they must be viewed as rivals. As Professor Peter Bouteneff has pointed out, there is some merit even in Orthodoxy to speak of the Church in both ahistorical and historical terms.³⁶ In stating this opinion, Bouteneff's concern is to make clear that within Orthodoxy, both the ahistorical [invisible] and historical [visible] manifestations of the Church point only to the one Church. He goes on to note, for instance, that in Orthodoxy, "One would never say that the heavenly Church

³² Basil Meeking and John Stott, Eds. *The Evangelical – Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission*, 59. Italics mine.

³³ Rose Dowsett, "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Evangelical Perspective," David A. Kerr and Kenneth R. Ross, Eds. *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Then and Now*, Regnum Studies in Mission (Oxford, England: Regnum, 2009), 257.

³⁴ Rose Dowsett, "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Evangelical Perspective", 257.

³⁵ All Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

³⁶ Peter Bouteneff, "Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ecumenical Movement, 27.

does not sin and the earthly Church does.”³⁷ The question to be addressed between Evangelicals and the Orthodox is the extent to which this claim may be made by each party.

It seems clear that the Church has a role as a *means* in God’s plan. It is the primary means through which God has chosen to bring those whom He has called to Himself. Those who follow Jesus might still be called “Fishers of men” and women (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17). Evangelicals recognize that God’s own work in sending Christ was itself a missionary act. As David Watson asserted, “God is a missionary. His redemptive work in the world is missionary work.”³⁸ Thus, from an Evangelical perspective God’s missionary work began with God and its end will also be in God. Christ’s mission was and remains the reconciliation of all things (Colossians 1:20), the salvation of humankind (John 3:17), the incorporation of those who have been raised with Christ, those who follow Him, into the very life of God (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 3:1-3) – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe this fact parallels the understanding of Orthodox believers when, for instance, the late Professor Fr. Ion Bria noted nearly three decades ago that “Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God is in God’s own self a life of communion and that God’s involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God’s very life.”³⁹

Evangelicals believe in mission because God sent His Son. And Jesus became incarnate ultimately to draw all men and women to Himself (John 12:32), thereby inviting them and incorporating them into God’s own life. He did this through the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14) in the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18-19), and by giving his will over to the will of the Father through His incarnation, death (for our sins), and resurrection, affirmations which according to Paul are of first importance (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Those who have responded to His gracious invitation have, in turn, been instructed to follow Him and to engage others with the message that He brought. It is the message of a God who desires to give life. It is the message of a God who wishes to make all things new. It is the message of a God who longs to extend His kingdom throughout all of creation and who has invited us to join with Him by serving as ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) on behalf of that kingdom. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20, which is essentially reaffirmed in Acts 1:8, makes it clear that Jesus’ disciples, including all of us, are to “Go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”

In the Church’s role as the primary means that God has chosen to communicate His message of Good News, the emphasis that Evangelicals have placed upon the individual once again comes into play. This emphasis on the individual may be considered its greatest strength for in some sense, it involves *every Christian* in the missionary task. But it is also its greatest potential weakness in that any individual can detach himself or herself from the Church, proclaiming Christ for whatever reason, but failing to understand the crucial role that the Church plays in God’s plan.⁴⁰ The Church, as the faithful Body of Christ who is its head, remains critically

³⁷ Peter Bouteneff, “Orthodox Ecclesiology and the Ecumenical Movement, 28.

³⁸ David Watson, *The Church*, 298.

³⁹ Ion Bria, *Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, WCC Mission Series (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1986), 3.

⁴⁰ This reminds me of Paul’s concern that there were many proclaiming Christ, but for the wrong reasons. See Philippians 1:15-18. “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice”.

important to the tasks of evangelization and mission because they are the will of God. These are not simply individual tasks to be undertaken as private entrepreneurial tasks. Still, the Evangelical emphasis upon the individual, supported by Spener's call to bear witness to the Gospel through word and action, has been a major source of encouragement to the development of the modern missionary movement. The first Protestant foreign missionaries, for instance, were deeply influenced by Spener and Pietism.⁴¹

Missionary activity was not very high on the agenda of most Protestants at the time of the Reformation. Neither Martin Luther, nor John Calvin, nor Ulrich Zwingli, nor any other leading Reformer showed any clear signs that missionary activity was a concern. There were several reasons for this apparent lack of interest in missions. First, their attention was almost exclusively focused on the western European context, a context that had been presumed to be "Christian" for centuries. Second, they were concerned to make the case for Protestantism before their Roman Catholic neighbors with whom they saw themselves locked into a life or death struggle in which it was not at all clear that their Protest would survive. Third, many Reformed Christians of the period believed that the Gospel had already been preached to the whole world, and much of the world had rejected it. There was no need to offer it to them a second time.⁴² Finally, most Calvinists of the day presumed that those who were meant to be saved would ultimately be saved, without further human intervention. While as early as 1630, Abraham Rogerius and later in 1656 Phillipus Baldaeus went as "missionaries" to India, their primary intent was to serve Dutch businessmen of the Dutch East India Company more like chaplains and as a result they worked almost exclusively with Dutch traders and did not reach out effectively to indigenous Indians.⁴³ The lack of missionary interests by most Protestant leaders would remain high, well into the 19th Century.⁴⁴

In a real sense, Protestant missions received its first major impetus when two young German Pietists, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, were recruited and commissioned by King Fredrick IV of Denmark and sent as Lutheran missionaries by the Halle Mission, to India in July 1706. They befriended a young Indian named Mudalyippan, who taught Portuguese and Tamil to them while they taught him German. He opened doors to them, providing many personal contacts. As a result, their ministry among the Indian people, particularly among the Brahmans prospered⁴⁵ and ultimately the Pietist version of Evangelical Christianity, including independent and self-supporting missionaries, spread.⁴⁶

Evangelicalism has always been a conversionist movement, that is, its proponents share the message of the Gospel with all those with whom they come into contact. They assume that those who hear the Good News must respond to it and they look for some evidence that it has been believed. This may sound like an arrogant position to take, but in the end, I do not believe that it is so. First of all, Jesus commanded that His followers go throughout the world making disciples. Second, the earliest followers of Jesus did just that. C. H. Dodd's analysis of early Christian preaching suggests quite strongly that the Apostolic preaching almost always involved

⁴¹ Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement: Volume II: Modern Christianity from 1454-1800* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 411-412.

⁴² Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1964, revised by Owen Chadwick 1986, reprinted 1990), 187-190.

⁴³ D. Dennis Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India: Tamil Evangelical Christians, 1706-1835* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 5.

⁴⁴ Rose Dowsett, "Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Evangelical Perspective", 253.

⁴⁵ D. Dennis Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India*, 1-4, 13-29.

⁴⁶ D. Dennis Hudson, *Protestant Origins in India*, 30-51.

the proclamation of the Gospel that was typically followed by the invitation to repent or by an explanation telling why the Gospel was so important to those who heard the message.⁴⁷ Clearly, such preaching was always evangelistic.

Unfortunately, the World Evangelical Alliance recognizes this activity with a minimalist statement that seems to mention its commitment to mission and evangelism only in passing, when it points to the Holy Spirit by whom the believer is enabled “to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ”.⁴⁸ Yet, even a quick scan of Evangelical preaching, evangelization and mission programs, or Evangelical discipleship programs will demonstrate almost immediately that this statement regarding “witness” and “work” is massively understated when compared with the facts.

While the Apostolic and Evangelical preaching may be quite similar, they still beg the question about the salvation of those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard the Gospel. I am well aware of such discussions among Evangelicals (as well as Catholics) related to those who die without the opportunity to enjoy a full knowledge of what God has done for them in Christ Jesus. I believe that it is possible for Evangelicals to affirm the claim made by the Bishops of the Catholic Church that “... in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him...” (Heb. 11:6)⁴⁹. But such a possibility, while generous on our part, does not assume that mission is no longer necessary. The Church, “still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize”⁵⁰. Such a position, it seems to me, supports Evangelicals who trust in God’s infinite mercy and grace, but since they have no ability to see into the hearts of others and they do not wish to presume on that mercy and grace by simply assuming that all will be saved whether or not they have heard the message of the Gospel. As a result, they continue in obedience to Jesus’ command, to evangelize, making disciples and baptizing them in keeping with Matthew 28:19-20, and engaging in all forms of missionary work throughout the entire world. In the end, salvation is a mystery and God surely retains the freedom to apply the work of Christ to anyone on whom He wishes to apply it in whatever mysterious way He chooses to do so. In the meantime Evangelicals carry the message of the Gospel forward.

It is the concern which Evangelicals hold, to be obedient to the missionary mandate and not to presume upon God’s grace, that they continue to engage in mission and evangelization. The typical Evangelical understanding of apostolicity does not require the apostolic succession of bishops, but it does require the Church, for it is in the Church that the People of God hear the words of the Apostolic Faith recorded in Scripture including the mandate to go into the whole world and make disciples. These concerns surely stand behind the commitments that the Lausanne Committee made in its 1974 Covenant when it stated that

We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as the Father sent him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world. We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole

⁴⁷ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964). See for example the passages he analyzed: Acts 2:14-59; 3:13-26; 4:10-12; 5:30-32; 10:36-43; 13:17-41.

⁴⁸ We believe in...the Holy Spirit, by whose indwelling the believer is enable to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ....”

⁴⁹ *Ad Gentes* 7.

⁵⁰ *Ad Gentes* 7.

world. The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel.⁵¹

It seems to me that the call for Evangelicals to “break out” of their “ecclesiastical ghettos” is a call to recognize the reality of the one Church as much as it is a call to end the kind of sectarianism that at times tends to separate Evangelicals from the world around them. If Evangelism is primary, then the recognition that “it takes the whole Church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world” is extremely important.

Just as important, if not more so, is the claim that “The Church is at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel”. The Church has a role in God's cosmic purpose from beginning to *end* in God's plan. It is the place toward which God moves His people. It is the Church that has been given the missionary mandate. There is, thus, an eschatological reality about the Church. The calling and gathering of the “saints” from throughout the entire world in every century and from every tribe, language, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9; 14:6) supports a type of catholicity to the Evangelical understanding of the Church. The Church is truly a universal reality in keeping with the claim made by Bishop Ignatius to the congregation at Smyrna. “Wherever the bishop shall appear,” he wrote, “there let the multitude also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is (*hē catholicē ekklēsia*) the catholic church” (*To the Smyrnaeans* 8). Its meaning within the early Christian context clearly refers to the universal character of the Church, though Evangelicals would view that catholicity far more in light of the presence of Jesus Christ, and far less in light of the presence of the bishop⁵² as would be spelled out later by Bishop Cyprian in the heat of conflict.⁵³ But to recognize that the Church is catholic in such universal terms – through the ages and including people from every tribe, language, people, and nation, Evangelicals may be affirming without fully realizing it, that the catholicity of the whole Church that recognizes all who have been made spiritually one with the People of God in all ages and in every place, is in some way present in each local congregation. Furthermore, every local congregation or manifestation of the Church is present in all congregations. It is only in light of this notion that Paul's remark, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26), makes sense. One needs to think only of Christians who are suffering for one reason or another throughout the world to recognize that their suffering is/must be our suffering as well.

The eschatological realization that the Church is part of the “last days” has also introduced a sense of compulsion or urgency among many Evangelicals to participate more fully in the evangelization of the world, in light of the imminence of the Second Coming. It should come as no surprise, then, that Evangelicals follow the lead of the Apostle Paul, when he wrote “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the

⁵¹ Lausanne Covenant, Article 6, The covenant is available at:

<http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>.

⁵² Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers, Part II, 2* (Hildesheim, Germany and New York, NY: Georg Olms Verlag, 1973), 310-312, note 2.

⁵³ “Speaking there is Peter, upon whom the Church had been built, and in the name of the Church he is teaching and revealing that even when a whole host of proud and presumptuous people may refuse to listen and go away, the Church herself does not go away from Christ, and that in his view the Church consists of the people who remain united with their bishop, it is the flock that stays by its shepherd. By that you ought to realize that *the bishop is in the Church and the Church is in the bishop, and whoever is not with the bishop is not in the Church*. You must understand that it is to no avail that people may beguile themselves with the illusion that while they are not at peace with the bishops of God they may still worm their way in and surreptitiously hold communion with certain people. Whereas, in truth, the Church forms one single whole; it is neither rent nor broken apart but is everywhere linked and bonded tightly together by the glue of *the bishops sticking firmly to each other*”. Cyprian, *Letter 66* (68). 8.3.

gospel...” (1 Corinthians 9:22b-23a). Such a mindset has contributed substantially to the diversity of evangelistic and missionary approaches that Evangelicals have taken throughout the world, and especially among those Evangelicals who live daily in light of a possible imminent return of Jesus Christ.

In summary, there are many places where the interests of Orthodox Christians and the interests of Evangelical Christians come together, especially in their mutual concern to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the world around them, that is, in the mission of the Church. Yet when it comes to their understandings of the Church, while there is some agreement on the nature of the Church, there are still some substantial places where they differ. These issues will continue to be places where ecumenical contact between these two vital parts of the Church are essential for the health of the whole Church, and ultimately for the *Missio Dei*.

To Jesus Christ “belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”⁵⁴

Appendix

Statement of Faith World Evangelical Alliance

We believe

...in the **Holy Scriptures** as originally given by God, divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy; and the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct...

One **God**, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...

Our **Lord Jesus Christ**, God manifest in the flesh, His virgin birth, His sinless human life, His divine miracles, His vicarious and atoning death, His bodily resurrection, His ascension, His mediatorial work, and His personal return in power and glory...

The **Salvation** of lost and sinful man through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith apart from works, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit...

The **Holy Spirit**, by whose indwelling the believer is enabled to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ...

The **Unity** of the Spirit of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ...

The **Resurrection** of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life, they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

⁵⁴ 1 Peter 4:11