

Session to Session

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Evangelicals and the Church

by Robert W. Patterson

When Fuller Theological Seminary dropped inerrancy from its theological statement in the early 1970s, an alarm went off in the conservative evangelical community that aroused an exhaustive theological debate, including a host of scholarly books and the decade-long work of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. The doctrine of Scripture, a critical plank in the Evangelical agenda since the early part of the century, was at stake; the issue could not be ignored.

Conservatives are to be commended for vigilance in spotting anything that resembles a low view of Scripture: Scripture after all, is a watershed—the final authority for faith and practice. Unfortunately one of the casualties of a single minded attention to scripture has been a neglect of other important areas of theology, especially the doctrine of the Church. One looks in vain for major books or articles that articulate and probe the nature of the Church or relate it to existing ecclesiastical structures. Little if any help comes from existing ecclesiastical institutions. Their doctrinal statements either refrain from comment on this critical subject or stutter with some innocuous affirmation about the Church as “all the redeemed throughout the ages.”

Evangelical insensitivity to the doctrine of the Church is understandable, given the ecclesiastical battles of the century that have forced many Evangelicals out of the historic denominations, or those who have not left into a minority party. Possibly because of these ecclesiastical realities, Evangelicals of the last two generations have been open to the influence of continental Anabaptist and pietist traditions which for good reasons emphasize a highly spiritual concept of the Church.

Illustrations of this weakening of the doctrine of the Church among Evangelicals are found in two major theological documents drafted last year. One is the section on the Church found in an otherwise outstanding theological formulation entitled *Evangelical Affirmations*. This statement was drafted in May 1989 by theologians and scholars at a conference called by Carl F. H. Henry and Kenneth S. Kantzer on the campus of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Cosponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals, the conferences aimed to “clarify the character of the evangelical movement and to affirm certain truths critical to the advancement of the church of Christ.” Unfortunately, although succeeding in virtually every

other area, the document does not define the very institution its affirmations were intended to advance. The statement on the Church is not nearly as strong or definite as other sections of the document:

We affirm that the church is a worshipping and witnessing community of Christians who profess faith in Christ and submit to his authority. Christ is building his church where his Word is preached and his name confessed. He sustains his church by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The same broad generalizations are inherent in the understanding of the Church expressed in the *Manila Manifesto*, a “public declaration of convictions, intentions, and motives” of three thousand Evangelicals who met in July 1989 in Manila as a sequel to the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne. Built upon the theme, “Calling the whole church to take the whole gospel to the world,” the

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Prophecy Today? Part III

by O. Palmer Robertson

Paul's fullest elaboration on the new covenant manifestation of prophecy is found in I Corinthians 14. Verses 29 through 33 of this chapter have particular relevance to the subject of the revelatory nature of new covenant prophecy. In the immediately preceding verses Paul declares that the worship services of the church must be ordered to facilitate the proper functioning of the multiplicity of gifts. “Two or three prophets” may speak while the others are to “discriminate” (v. 29). The “others” apparently refers to other prophets. But what is this “discriminating” that is to occur in connection with the exercise of their gift by the prophets? The New International Version expands on the word “discriminate” (which it translates “weigh carefully”) by adding to the text of Scripture the phrase “what is said.” The presumption of the translators is that the “discrimination” to be rendered by the prophets has to do with the words that have been spoken. But this assumption overlooks the regular usage in the New Testament of the word “discriminate.” The term *diakrino* has the basic meaning of “to separate, to sever, to make a distinction.” Most frequently it is used to indicate a distinction among people. Acts 15:9 says: “God made no distinction (*diakrino*) between us and them.” Between

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document fails to explain exactly what is meant by the "whole church," although it does caution against identifying the Evangelical community with the universal Church. Avoiding discussion of the nature of the Church, the manifesto articulates a highly functional ecclesiology:

Every Christian congregation is a local expression of the Body of Christ and has the same responsibilities. It is both a "holy priesthood" to offer God the spiritual sacrifices of worship and a "holy nation" to spread abroad his excellences in witness (I Pet. 2:5, 9). The church is thus both a worshipping and a witnessing community, gathered and scattered, called and sent. Worship and witness are inseparable.

Those who value the Reformed tradition will notice that the planks in both documents are as ambiguous and noncommittal in this area as are neoorthodox attempts to affirm the inspiration and authority of the Bible. In many respects they parallel the attempt in the civil realm by sociologists and self-proclaimed social reformers to define the family, not as historically and legally understood as a lawfully married husband and wife with their offspring, but simply as a group of people living together.

Reflective of the broader Evangelical community, neither document distinguishes between the invisible Church known only to God and the visible Church known to man. Neither do they comment about the significance of the sacraments and the ordinances that make a Church visible. In these respects, they depart from the Evangelical heritage as expressed in virtually every confessional document since the Protestant Reformation.

In differentiating between the "universal Kirk" (invisible) and the "Kirk triumphant" (visible) the *Scots' Confession* of 1560 identifies the marks of the Church as 1) "the true preaching of the Word of God;" 2) "the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus;" and 3) "ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered" (ch. 18). The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) does not directly address the nature of the Church, but clearly affirms and explains the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as "visible, holy signs and seals instituted by God" (questions 65-82).

The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1556), the most comprehensive of the Reformation documents—devoting twelve chapters to the Church, her sacraments, and related subjects—emphasize not simply preaching, but "the lawful and sincere preaching of the Word of God" as a sign of the true Church (emphasis added). In addition, this Confession identifies those who are members of the Church as ones who, among other things, participate in the sacraments instituted by Christ (ch. 17).

According to the *Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England* (1571), "the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered" (article 19). John Wesley included this same article in his formulation of the *Twenty-five Articles of Religion*, adopted by the Methodist

Conference in Baltimore in 1784. The *Westminster Confession* (1647), which shaped American Protestantism for three centuries, also affirms that "Christ hath given the ministry oracles, and ordinances of God unto this catholic, visible Church" (ch. 25).

With the sole exception of the Quakers, even statements of faith justified by those of "low Church" tradition affirm the visible Church as her sacraments or ordinances. The *First Confession* (1646), drafted by Baptists in London, states: "The Church is a company of visible saints, called and separated from the Word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel; being baptized into that faith." The *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* (1658), a minor revision of the *Westminster Confession* by Independents (Congregationalists), retains the latter's teaching on the visible Church and the necessity of the sacraments. Furthermore, the *Confession of the Free Church of Geneva* (1848) after acknowledging that local churches "must make themselves known to the world," affirms: "We believe that the Saviour has instituted baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbols and pledges which he has acquired for us" (sections 15 and 16).

Lutherans share this broad consensus on the nature of the Church. The *Augsburg Confession* (1530) identifies the Church "as the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel" (article 7).

In addition, the Evangelical Alliance, a confederation of Protestants formed in England in 1846 (and whose American counterpart was launched in 1867) adopted a statement of faith which included nine planks affirming principles considered essential to cooperation. The final plank insisted on the importance of the sacraments, recognizing: "the divine institution of the Christian ministry and the obligation and perpetuity of the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper."

Granted, the drafters and signers of *Evangelical Affirmations* or the *Manila Manifesto* did not intend to produce a comprehensive statement of faith. Yet a more salient and pertinent discussion of the Church would have been appropriate. That neither document promotes a renewed appreciation for the doctrine of the Church is most unfortunate, given the explosion of parachurch enterprises and personalities who claim to speak for "the Church," as well as the disturbing trend in some Evangelical churches to drop baptism as a membership requirement. Serious theological reflection on this vital doctrine is needed now more than ever, especially if Evangelicals want to be faithful to the Great Commission, that imperative given by Christ setting forth ministry of both Word and sacrament as essential functions of making disciples of all nations.

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the Jewish people and the gentile people God made no discrimination regarding the matter under discussion. In a similar manner, I Corinthians 4:7 declares: "For who made you differ (*diakrino*) from someone else?" Again, the "discrimination" to which Paul refers is between people. Following the same pattern, I Corinthians 6:5 states: "Is there no one to discriminate (*diakrino*) between believers?" Once more, the distinction envisioned is one between persons. Finally, James 2:3, 4 declares: "If you say one thing to the rich and another thing to the poor, have you not discriminated (*diakrino*) among yourselves?" Again, a distinction among people is the point of the discrimination.

Considering this regular use of the term for "discriminate," a more precise understanding of the use of the term as it is found in I Corinthians 14:29 may be achieved. "Two or three prophets should speak, and the other (prophets) should discriminate." A judgment clearly must be made. But the judgment is not about the words being spoken by the prophets. Instead, a discrimination must be made among persons. Someone must determine who among the prophets is to speak and who is not to speak. This responsibility is entrusted to the prophets, who shall maintain order among their number. Even the utterance of inspired words must be exercised in a framework of order.

Paul assures his readers that all the prophets ultimately will have opportunity to speak (v. 31). But he also reminds them that everything must be done decently and in order. For even the spirit of prophets is subject to the prophets (vv. 32, 33, 40).

So the discrimination in this passage refers to a distinction for the sake of order among prophets, not about the words of the prophets. Some may have to wait until a "second service." But all eventually will have the opportunity to deliver the revelation God has granted them.

Equally critical in understanding this passage is the word "revelation." A "revelation" comes first to one, and then a further "revelation" comes to another (v. 30). This reverence to "revelation" is bracketed by verses concerned with the experience of "prophecy" (vv. 29, 31). It might be proposed that this "revelation" actually is not a revelation. Instead, it is something less than a "prophecy" that is "revelational" as the term is understood elsewhere in Scripture. It could be proposed that this phenomenon might then be designated a "non-revelational revelation." It is revelation from God, a prophetic utterance. But somehow it is less than the classic phenomenon of prophecy.

But such an analysis of the intent of Scripture takes a person far from the words of Scripture. The whole context suggests the "normal" prophetic experience of receiving and delivering an inspired word from the Lord. I Corinthians was composed at a time when very little of the New Testament had been written. The church at that stage needed an authoritative word from the Lord to direct the pattern of their life under the new covenant. Very likely none of the inspired manuscripts of the New Testament were available to the Corin-

thians at this point.

Almost certainly the reference in Corinthians was not to an "illumination" of new covenant scriptures or new covenant truth already known to them. Instead, the Corinthian church received authoritative, infallible, and inerrant "revelations" of the truths of the new covenant era through the manifold exercise of the gift of prophecy. The prophetic experience that had brought God's word to the old covenant community now communicated the truth about this new era to God's new covenant people. Because God was just now manifesting the wonder of the realities of the new covenant, it is not surprising that a manifold display of the prophetic gift occurred in Corinth.

The introduction of the concept of a "non-revelational revelation" could be extremely dangerous when applied to prophetic utterances. If one prophetic utterance could be designated a "non-revelational revelation, then any word of prophecy eventually might be declared a "non-revelational revelation." In the end, the revelational character of Scripture itself might be redefined in these confusing terms.

On the other hand, a great danger lies in another direction with this concept of a prophetic utterance that is indeed God's word, and yet is something less than the perfections of his word as associated with biblical prophecy. Then a person is made subject in one sense to a word that supposedly is inspired immediately of God, and yet at the same time by its own definition participates in human fallibility. Even though he knows this supposedly "prophetic" utterance to be fallible, is the believer nonetheless to submit as though it came directly from God. Or is he to resist yielding to this word that has come immediately from God because he also knows it to be fallible?

This concept of prophecy as it is being proposed in the church today creates an intolerable circumstance, a dilemma of confusion that destroys the meaning of unquestioning obedience of God's word. It is not true to the teaching of the word of God, and has the potential for undermining the basic foundation of a life of trusting obedience to the revelation of God's prophets. It destroys the necessary distinction between the true and the false prophet, and makes God's people the helpless victims of error mixed with truth.

Conclusion

The history of prophetism extends backward to the time of Moses. From his day, God consistently revealed himself to his people through the stream of prophets he had promised Moses. The surety of the prophetic word enabled God's people to resist the pretenses of the steady stream of false prophets throughout Israel's history. Joel, recalling the older Mosaic experiences of the prophets, predicted that the new covenant community would enjoy the same kind of prophetic revelation. The apostles Peter and Paul in their turn applied these same descriptions to the prophetic word of their own day.

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In view of the biblical testimony concerning the nature of prophecy, several conclusions may be proposed:

First, the starting-point of any discussion about prophecy today should begin with the long history of the revelational character of this gift of the Spirit. Throughout the old and new covenant eras, God remains as the originator of the truly prophetic word.

Secondly, the warning of Scripture concerning the dangers of false prophecy must be remembered. If revelation continues, then prophecy continues. But if revelation has been completed with the perfection of the New Testament scriptures, then prophecy as the principal revelational gift now has ceased. The modern preacher may be "prophetic" in his ministry just as he may be "apostolic." But he must beware of claiming for himself either the revelational experience of the prophet or the foundational position of the apostle. Replete are the cases both ancient and modern of lives seriously damaged by an improper claim concerning a supposedly prophetic utterance.

Thirdly, the biblical testimony concerning prophecy has a

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critical effect on the question of the role of women in the church. The primary text supporting the speaking of women in worship refers to their "prophesying" (I Cor. 11:5). If "to prophesy" means to speak revelationally, then the role of women in the church today is clarified. Only so long as the revelational gift of prophecy remained alive in the church could women serve as instrument of the divine word. But if the prophetic word of God has found its perfection with the completion of the new covenant Scriptures, then the role of women as instruments of divine revelation now has ceased.

The questions raised by the subject of prophecy are not small in significance. They are critical to the health, the well-being, and the proper ordering of the church of Jesus Christ today. Let the church be careful that all things are done decently and in order, in accordance with the teachings of the prophetic scriptures. Ω

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