

The Evangelical Retrieval of Tradition

Evangelical theology has always had a positive relationship with the pre-Reformation Christian tradition; however, this relationship was usually focused on its affirmation of the first four ecumenical creeds and its use of Augustine. Within the last several decades some in the Evangelical community have broadened their interest in the patristic and medieval eras' theology and practices.

Why has the Evangelical tradition been disengaged from large parts of the Christian tradition? There are three reasons. First, Protestant commitment to *sola scriptura* has, in practice, meant for Evangelicals that the Bible is the only significant source of theological wisdom. For many Evangelicals, the post-biblical tradition had little or nothing to contribute to our understanding of God. Second, many Evangelicals believed that Christian thought and practice suffered a calamitous decline in the post-biblical era. For them, the centuries between the New Testament and the Protestant Reformation were centuries of error and idolatry. Third, Evangelicals' view of the Christian life, with its emphasis on revivalistic conversion, had little in common with the traditional practices of baptism, confirmation, and communion.

However, from the 1960s to the present, several of the leading institutions of American Evangelicalism have engaged in a steady journey toward traditional Christianity. *Christianity Today* and Fuller Theological Seminary, for instance, have a broadly ecumenical focus. They symbolize the degree to which many Evangelicals seek to connect with other branches of the Christian traditions. The same can be said for Evangelical publishing houses such as William B. Eerdmans and Zondervan. These publishers have moved steadily toward an ecumenical slate of authors.

Other signals of Evangelical interest in the broad Christian tradition include the movement of around 2000 Evangelicals into the Antiochian Archdiocese of North America in the late 1980s; Franky Schaeffer's (b. 1952) conversion to the Orthodox Church in 1990; Richard John Neuhaus' (1936-2009) conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in 1990; and the formation of the Orthodox Evangelical Church, which emphasizes tradition and the ancient and historic Christian faith. More recently, BakerBooks has launched a series, *Evangelical Ressourcement*, whose books help Evangelicals connect with the theology and practices of the patristic era, while InterVarsity Press' *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* introduces readers to patristic commentators.

These developments in Evangelicalism are part of a larger trend in theology, moving behind highly scholastic and systematized forms of doctrinal expression to the less systematic forms of early Christianity. In Roman Catholic theology this has meant moving beyond 19th century scholastic-Thomistic theology to patristic and medieval sources. For Methodists and the Holiness Movement, this has meant moving behind the highly systematic theologies of the 19th century (such as John Miley's) to John Wesley's theology and its historical antecedents. For Evangelicals it means supplementing their emphasis on Puritan writers and the Princeton theology of Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield with the heritage of patristic theologians.

Alongside this return to pre-Reformation theology stands the re-appropriation of early church practices and forms of worship. Robert Webber (1933-2007) was one of the leaders of the attempt to allow the liturgical tradition to exert an influence on Evangelical modes of worship. His concept of ancient-future worship embraced the idea that Evangelical worship should include such traditional practices as recitation, singing the *gloria*, and the stations of the cross. It should also make a prominent place for the celebration of communion. Webber's writings came at a critical time, for

churches were becoming aware that a generational shift was taking place in concert with the rise of a post-modern, post-Christian culture. In this situation, Webber urged Evangelicals to deepen their worship by recovering the rich heritage of Christianity's past. The emerging church movement, with its interest in liturgy, traditional forms of prayer, and physical aids to worship (e.g., candles), has put into practice Webber's general vision for a renewal of Evangelical worship.