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Divine Action/Human Replication: Applied Justice[1]

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Divine Action; Great Commission; Social Justice; Interreligious Dialogue; Theology of Religions

ABSTRACT:
In this paper, I will argue that individual Christians can advance justice and social affairs when they replicate divine action, as modeled by Jesus, in which God engages individuals in such a way that highlights their value. To support this position, I will begin by framing the problem by briefly identifying the nature of evangelical theology and highlighting the relevant aspects of God. In the second section, I summarize a contemporary theory of justice from social philosophy (Silvers and Francis) and propose an application of this theory to religious diversity. In the third section, I will illustrate this proposal, focusing on interreligious dialogue and argue that as persons replicate divine action, a proper sense of individual value is promoted and bonds of confidence are established such that trust is developed; hence, justice is performed and social affairs affected. In the final section, I will address some of the problems raised by this proposal.

Justice and social affairs must be a concern for evangelical Christianity if it is to fulfill the Great Commission, but this may require us to reconsider what we mean by 'justice' and how it is best promoted. In this paper, I will argue that individual Christians can advance justice and social affairs when they replicate divine action, as modeled by Jesus, in which God engages individuals in such a way that highlights their value. To support this position, I will begin by framing the problem by briefly identifying the nature of evangelical theology and highlighting the relevant aspects of God. In the second section, I summarize a contemporary theory of justice from social philosophy and propose an application of this theory to religious diversity. In the third section, I will illustrate this proposal, focusing on interreligious dialogue and argue that as persons replicate divine action, a proper sense of individual value is promoted and bonds of confidence are established such

1 I wish to thank the Council of Senior Professionals at Fresno Pacific University for the invitation to present an earlier form of this paper (January 2011). It was a follow-up to "Christian Relationship with the World: Evangelicalism and World Religions," *Direction Journal: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 39 2 (2010, Fall): 244-254. A second version of the paper was presented at Houston Baptist University (March 2012).

that trust is developed; hence, justice is performed and social affairs affected.[2] Finally, I will address some of the problems raised by this proposal.

I

Evangelical theology is a systematic contemplation of orthodox Christian beliefs in light of scripture, tradition, and the mission of the church and in which scripture is understood as the norm. John Davis put it this way,

> For evangelical theology scripture is both the primary source and the highest norm. However, the primacy of scripture does not exclude tradition as a secondary source and norm for theology. … Evangelical theology is also reflection on the sources of the faith and mission of the church in mutual relation. Theology should never be a merely academic enterprise, but rather the search for biblical understanding in the context of the ministry and mission of the church. … Evangelical theology is properly "task theology," i.e., theology hammered out in response to the challenges posed by the Great Commission.[3]

Its methodology reflects the three dogmas of evangelicalism, which were outlined by Clark Pinnock.[4] Pinnock claims that an evangelical theology must be evangelical, conservative, and contemporary. It must be faithful to the Gospel message. It must exhibit "an essential *fidelity* to the doctrinal structure of the biblical and Christian tradition."[5] Furthermore, it must demonstrate a

2 Various terms have been used to refer to what I am calling interreligious dialogue. It is often referred to as 'multifaith' or 'interfaith' dialogue. Each term elicits a connotation that is useful. 'Multifaith' captures a dialogue among the involved religious traditions. 'Interfaith' points to the dialogue between. It could be suggested that 'multifaith', while foundational, may focus upon sharing one's history and understanding of their given tradition. However, 'interfaith' may focus on the region between the various faiths. Given this, at one level in religious dialogue the sharing of histories and understandings is essential. In order to clarify and demystify, dialogue among the religions must occur. However, some of the most interesting aspects of religious dialogue is found in that space between the religions. Hence, my preference for 'inter'. In some traditions, the concept of "faith" does not easily fit for some practitioners, e.g., Buddhism and Judaism; hence, the term 'interreligious' is used. (I want to thank Alan Race for suggesting the various implications of these terms.)

3 John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 44-45.

4 Clark H. Pinnock, "Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary," *Christianity Today*, 23 (1979, January 5): 23-29.

5 Pinnock, "Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary," 23. (Italics are the authors.)

"*responsibility* to the contemporary hearers of the Gospel whereby we seek to communicate the message meaningfully to them and apply it creatively to the modern situation."[6] As a result, Pinnock suggests that the theological methodology adopted by evangelicals should be bi-polar. "We should strive to be faithful to historical Christian beliefs taught in Scripture, and *at the same time* to be authentic and responsible to the contemporary hearers."[7] Given this stress on maintaining traditional theology while addressing issues of contemporary concern, we may claim that evangelicals understand God as a Triune God who is not silent, who promises, and who acts.[8]

The doctrine of the Trinity establishes a distinctiveness within the Godhead as well as how God interacts with the world, and, at the same time, reflects the essential unity within the Godhead. This essential unity within the Godhead is one of those nonnegotiable elements of the Christian faith. However, as Donald Bloesch points out that "God is not simply a unity but a triunity. He is differentiated within himself. He not only exists but also coexists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 3:16, 17; 28:19; John 14:16, 17; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6)."[9] Furthermore, God is not one who has left the created order in silence, but one who is self-revealing. Revelation is God self-revealing in order that the created might know God. God self-reveals in order that the created might be in a relationship with the Creator. After the fall, the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6), God's purpose for revelation did not change, though it did take on a new task. Reconciliation was necessary to bridge the alienation of human rebellion. The means of this reconciliation was provided in the life, substitutionary death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Revelation, whether general or special, has the purpose of drawing the created into community with the Creator. The Creator has engaged in communication with creation. The most significant means of communication is in the person of Jesus. However, God also has communicated through the written Word and other

6 Pinnock, "Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary," 23.

7 Pinnock, "Evangelical Theology: Conservative and Contemporary," 23.

8 This definition reflects an attempt to move away from ways of defining the Christian God that emphasize essence and attributes. Those concepts are much more familiar to those generations that were very accustom to Greek thought. This definition seeks to capture the traditional notion, but in more contemporary terms.

9 Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, I: God, Authority, and Salvation* (Peabody, MA: Pince Press, 2001), 35.

forms of special revelation. While these means of communication or self-revealing provide fuller understanding of God's intent, they do not negate that God is revealed for some through nature or through conscience. The fall has damaged the human precondition toward spirituality and knowing God in an intimate way, but the fall has not limited God's ability to communicate. It has not limited the majesty of God to break through and speak even if the only means is that damaged, broken conscience.[10] In summary, revelation is ultimately about engaging humans in community with their Creator. The God of evangelical Christianity is not silent, and because of this communication, it is possible to identify divine action such that human replication is possible.

Furthermore, this self-revealing God is portrayed as a promise-maker. While numerous promises can be identified, two are significant for our purpose regarding justice. The promise of forgiveness for sin is captured in the Christian doctrine of atonement and presupposes the human condition of failing to meet God's standard.[11] For evangelical theology, atonement involves addressing the holiness of God and God's attitude toward sin by understanding that the atonement process both pays for sin (i.e., expiation) and satisfies (i.e., propitiation) God's wrath toward sin. Furthermore, this payment and satisfaction involves the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the God-Man. Finally, the results of atonement is reconciliation. Persons are reconciled to God; persons are reconciled with other persons;

10 On one hand, this claim may not be problematic; the Fall did not thwart God's ability to be self-revealing. However, on the other hand, it does take sides on a controversy between Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. "This point of contact is what theological anthropology on the basis of Gen. 1:27 calls the 'image of God' in man. In this connexion we cannot possibly agree with E. Brunner … when he takes this to refer to the humanity and personality which even sinful man retains from creation, for the humanity and personality of sinful man cannot possibly signify conformity to God, a point of contact for the Word of God. In this sense, as a possibility which is proper to man qua creation, the image of God is not just, as it is said, destroyed apart from a few relics; it is totally annihilated." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I.1: The Word of God*, (G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, Editors) (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 238. For Brunner the conscience "does not speak of God, but it is the flaming sword which drives us away from the presence of God. … [F]aith awakens when man sees himself, not in light of conscience, but in the new light thrown upon his nature by the gracious Word of God, in Christ." Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, (Translated by Olive Wyon) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 157-158.

11 "Any notion that God by nature is tolerant of sin has always been abhorrent to historic Judeo-Christian theology. Scripture insists on God's unqualified righteousness and connects salvation with grace alone. … Hope for sinful man lies only in Yahweh's saving rescue and in his righteous rule" (Carl R.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, vol. III* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 65.).

and persons are reconciled with the cosmos. For evangelical Christianity, the atonement is completely a work of God.[12] (Religions do not save – only God can bestow salvation to individuals based on the atoning work of Jesus Christ.) The promise of forgiveness portrays a God who helps the created order by providing the means of reconciliation. This same God promises help to live the life that exemplifies one reconciled with God, e.g., one who "strives for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). The writer of Hebrews points out that in Jesus Christ, believers have a high-priest so they can draw near the throne of grace to find mercy and grace to help in time of need (4:16). Also, believers have a mediator (ch. 9) who makes possible the ongoing reconciliation (10:10). The writer of Hebrews claims that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of the faith (12:2). Finally, the praise to God, which believers should continually offer, is "the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (13:15). Furthermore, the Gospel of John records a promise made by Jesus toward the end of his earthly ministry. In John 14:6, we find the promise of the Holy Spirit, the Counselor or Helper. In John 16:8-9, we find that part of the ministry of the Spirit is that of convicting the world of sin. However, the passage also portrays the Spirit as one who will teach spiritual truths (John 16:13). As a result, the one who promises forgiveness by providing the means, also, provides the necessary help to make the most of the reconciliation. It is the Triune God who promises help.

Finally, while for the sake of this presentation we have separated the motifs of God as one who promises, from God as one who acts, it should be evident that the two are intertwined. The significance of God as one who promises is dependent upon God's ability to act and bring about that, which is promised. The Christian doctrine of providence or control or ultimate domination over the created order, presents a God who is very different than a deistic God who is no longer involved in the cosmos.[13] This understanding of God as a Triune God who is not silent, who promises and who acts is foundational for evangelicals concerned about justice and social affairs as they strive to fulfill the great commission.

12 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 818-858.

13 Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 31-51.

II

Anita Silvers and Leslie Pickering Francis offer an interesting version of the social contract theory.[14] According to Silvers and Francis, recent versions of the social contract theory place individuals who are disabled outside the realm of justice, creating the "outlier problem". For example, they point to a Rawlsian approach in which "[t]o make the prospect of reaching agreement plausible, the parties participating in the process are presumed to be roughly equivalent to each other in strength, skills, smartness, sensibilities, and seeking sovereignty over themselves."[15] In this approach, those who have value and are part of the process to determine justice are those who exhibit homogeneity. They are those who exhibit rationality, full capacity for autonomy, and the capacity to properly care for themselves. This uniformity principle underscores the devaluation of those "outliers" who lack conformity and as a result are not significant in the discussion regarding justice. Silvers and Francis' model attempts to rectify this problem. They claim that "[u] nderstanding contracting not in terms of people jockeying for position against one another but in terms of people developing bonds of confidence with each other dissipates the challenges made to social contract theory on behalf of disabled 'outliers'."[16] These bonds of confidence foster trust among the participants in spite of their differences; hence, practices that enhance trust do not exclude those identified as outliers. For Silvers and Francis, "the mutual deference elicited by the dynamic of trusting and being trusted should induce contractors to deal respectfully rather than paternalistically with whoever becomes dependent."[17] While they acknowledge developing trust is "risky and hard," the process promotes a change in attitude. "Thus, when contracting with trust, contractors will not ask what they have to give over to other people to secure advantage. They will instead ask what they

14 Anita Silvers and Leslie Pickering Francis, "Justice through Trust: Disability and the "Outlier Problem" in Social Contract Theory," *Ethics* 116 (2005, October): 40-76.

15 Silvers and Francis, "Justice through Trust," 45.

16 Silvers and Francis, "Justice through Trust," 59.

17 Silvers and Francis, "Justice through Trust," 70.

must change about themselves … so that others can be confident in them."[18] As Silvers and Francis conclude, their proposal "is a society that empowers vulnerable people both to trust and to be trusted."[19] How does Silvers and Francis' proposal of justice through trust apply to the issue of divine action/human replication? Their proposal, I believe, mirrors the methodology and results of Jesus' ministry as he engaged individuals, and evangelical Christians can strive to stimulate justice by learning to replicate the methodology of Jesus.

Within evangelical circles, it became popular at the end of the twentieth century to ask "what would Jesus do" or even a better question, "what did Jesus do?"[20] The actions of Jesus are an example of divine action, and the ministry of Jesus was a work of exposing the value of individuals that society perceived as outside the established system of valuation. Even a superficial look at his ministry as presented by the gospels will note that Jesus often engaged individuals who were outsiders and these encounters frequently resulted in developing bonds of confidence.[21] Trust was established. Furthermore, Silvers and Francis' proposal provides a theoretical framework to support the modeling which humans can replicate. Consider the simple question "How

18 Silvers and Francis, "Justice through Trust," 74-75. Unlike servant leadership, which was developed from Robert Greenleaf's essay "The Servant as Leader" and intended as a business management theory about effective leadership, justice through trust is a take on social contract theory and is intended to challenge the Rawlsian account. "Rawls's account of justice is procedural in nature, focusing on political and social processes that all the parties to the contract perceive as being fair, with the stability of the political arrangements contingent on relationships wherein equally endowed participants who adopt just forms of decisionmaking will reciprocate social contributions once beyond the veil" (Anita Silvers and Michael Ashley Stein, "Disability and the Social Contract," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 74 (2007): 1618.).

19 Silvers and Francis, "Justice through Trust," 76.

20 The story of this movement is found in Garrett Sheldon and Deborah Morris, *What Would Jesus Do?: A Contemporary Retelling of Charles M. Sheldon's Classic In His Steps* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1993).

21 Jesus engaged those outside the typical understanding of having significance: Matthew 8:1-5 – leper cleansed; 8:28-34 – demons cast out; 9:1-8 – paralytic healed; 9:27-34 – sight to blind and speech to the dumb; 12:9-14 – healed withered hand; Mark 5:25-34 – woman with the issue of blood; 7:31-37 – deaf-mute healed; 10:13-16 – blesses little children; Luke 7:11-17 – widow's son; 19:1-10 – Zacchaeus the tax collector; 23:39-43 – penitent thief; John 4:7-38 – Samaritan woman; 8:2-11 – woman caught in adultery; and 9:1-12 – man born blind. From the perspective the religious leaders in the first century, these individuals were to be avoided. As a result, these individuals were marginalized. In parallel fashion, according to Silvers and Francis, the Rawlsian approach to justice marginalizes those individuals who do not conform or are roughly equivalent to those determining justice. Those outside the sphere of decision-making yet affected by decisions made are those identified as outliers.

should we engage those whose religious tradition is different from our own?"

This question raises several challenges for evangelicals.[22] While they exhibit a level of theological tolerance absent in other forms of conservative Protestant Christianity, evangelicals frequently slip into modes of debate as they confront those who are not within the Christian church or "outliers."[23] However, this approach may be as unsatisfactory as the Rawlsian approach is for Silvers and Francis. If evangelicals were to engage in developing bonds of confidence, we would strive to foster trust.[24] As bonds of confidence are established, trust is developed, relationships are established, and we may be in a better position to promote the kingdom of God. Furthermore, as trust is developed, greater cooperation may be experienced as differing parties work together to address common problems. I believe this social concept that justice is developed through the promotion of trust reflects divine action and illustrates the value of all persons, even those outside of the church. This would make evangelicals vulnerable, but such an approach seems closer to the model illustrated by the ministry of Jesus; hence, replicating divine action.

III

Up to this point my proposal has been abstract; I now wish to expand my application and provide a very specific illustration of human replication of divine action as outlined above. I will focus on participation in interreligious dialogue and claim that if evangelicals wish to continue their mission, which provided them with their name, and be obedient to the Great Commission of evangelization and discipleship, then they must be present at the table where the conversation is taking place. Interreligious dialogue groups provide an

22 Robert Boyd, "Religious Diversity and Evangelical Thought: Pre-1980s," *Interreligious Insight, A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* 9 1 (July 2011): 49-54 and "Religious Diversity and Evangelical Thought: Post-1980s," *Interreligious Insight, A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* 9 2 (December 2011): 29-36.

23 Confrontation or traditional approaches to apologetics are appropriate at times. However, other approaches to apologetics may be best at other times. David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993). James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

24 Obviously bonds of confidence are not fostered by being deceitful. Being truthful is essential for confidence and trust; however, this confidence may be planted by working together on issues of common concern such as a local homeless problem.

excellent opportunity to join the conversation among individuals who are interested in God-talk.[25] However, the ground rules frequently outlined by interreligious groups for dialogue require evangelicals to learn a new way of talking about their faith.[26] In these dialogue groups, the emphasis is on sharing information about one's own faith, and proselytizing is considered inappropriate. Furthermore, evangelicals must learn to listen to positions they consider wrong, whether the position is presented by a fellow Christian, who is not an evangelical, or by a member of some "alien" faith-tradition.[27] Dialogue is about listening, learning, and sharing when it is your turn. It is an act of engagement that fosters trust. If interreligious dialogues are properly structured, all parties will have an opportunity, at some point, to share their understanding of their own faith. By participating in such dialogues, evangelicals will learn that while they may be in theological disagreement with others in the dialogue, they do share common concerns as persons who are interested in social justice, or peace, or correcting misconceptions that lead to distrust, or dealing with local issues like poverty, the homeless or religious freedom.[28]

These social issues require a global approach if progress is to be made concerning them. By "global" I mean an approach that involves all relevant elements of the local community; if the issue is dealing with the homeless, then the homeless need to be represented in the problem-solving process. This

25 To speak of God-talk should not exclude those traditions that do not talk about "God," traditions such as Buddhism or Unitarian Universalism. In the broadest sense, God-talk refers to talking about ultimate concern or ultimate power.

26 For example, the Fresno Multifaith Exchange outlines six ground rules as part of their Mission Statement: 1) The context of the program is one of rejoicing in the faith diversity of the Fresno community. 2) The program will look for depth through teachings, shared dialogue, and social exchange. 3) There will be information sharing; there will not be proselytizing. 4) Hospitality will be simple and minimal, in keeping with the traditions of a given religion. 5) Study group members are asked to commit, as much as possible, to visits and dialogue for the entire schedule. 6) Study group members should represent a balanced variety religiously, racially, and culturally. (Revised June 2004). In the third section of this paper, some of the problems raised by such ground rules will be addressed.

27 While some evangelicals understand what it means to listen, others simply demand to proclaim the truth and refuse to listen. Recently as I spoke with a local pastor, he honestly admitted that when he is around non-Christians all he can do is to tell them that they are going to hell if they continue to reject Jesus. That is the only interaction he is willing to have with non-Christians.

28 These are part of the Great Commission. The evangelical message is one of Good News, and as evangelicals participate their message of optimism will be realized.

global approach will require representative members of many faith-traditions working together since poverty, for example, is not a problem isolated to a single tradition. As long as mistrust and misunderstanding exist among members of differing religions, mutual global solutions will be wanting. As a result, interreligious dialogue is foundational for tackling some of the contemporary social issues. This call to dialogue is not new for evangelicals. Individuals, such as David Hesselgrave and Terry Muck, have encouraged the tradition to participate in such dialogues, but for many evangelicals such activities are yet to be experienced.[29]

The task of engaging in dialogue that promotes justice and social affairs is not a simple one, and it must be done with an attitude of humbleness, openness, and integrity. John Piper captures this attitude as he defines humility as "reveling in [God's] grace, not our goodness. In pressing us on to all the peoples, God is pressing us further into the humblest and deepest experience of his grace and weaning us more and more from our ingrained pride."[30] Again – it calls for a process of divine action and human replication.

IV

Such a proposal is not without problems. Two major objections may be raised concerning engagement in such dialogue. First, it may be claimed that a meaningful dialogue requires a willingness to engage another and that both parties must be open to changing their stance. The objection claims that religious people, specifically evangelicals, are not open to such change. Hence, devoutly religious individuals cannot engage in meaningful interreligious dialogue. The second objection claims that even if an individual could engage in such a discussion, most would not because it makes them vulnerable: they risk hearing something that would cause them to reconsider their own

29 David Hesselgrave, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," in *Mission Trends No. 5: Faith Meets Faith*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press and Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 123-127. Terry C. Muck, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36 4 (1993, December): 517-529. Terry C. Muck, "Is there Common Ground among Religions? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997, March): 99-112.

30 John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 200.

position. This vulnerability is dangerous. Hence, they would not engage in such dialogues. I understand the first objection may be taken as a theoretical objection, whereas the second is a practical objection.

First, it is unclear that the *apriori* assumption that "meaningful dialogue requires a willingness to change" is correct. However, dialogue is not debate. In a debate, one enters the fray in order to win, but this is not necessarily true of some dialogues. In a Socratic dialogue, a participant enters the dialogue with the understanding that he or she may be incorrect regarding some relevant issue. Hence, a participant engages in dialogue as a means of pursuing truth and is willing to experience a global change, i.e., conversion to a new world-view, should the evidence justify such a move. In fact, one enters a Socratic dialogue with the hope of discovering truth in order to change from a false belief to a truth belief. Global change is the desired outcome of such dialogue. For example, as an epistemological fallibilist, I understand that I have been and can still be wrong on any number of beliefs that I hold to be true. This includes those claim statements that I hold to be properly basic beliefs. A willingness to listen and to learn from others is an important consequence of my fallibilism. Paul suggests that if one could disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we should abandon the Christian faith (I Cor. 15). Evangelicals, of all people, should be known as people who place truth over tradition. Interreligious dialogue may lead to global change, but global change is not entailed by the event of dialogue. Even in a Socratic dialogue, global change should not occur until truth is discovered, which may not happen in any given dialogue. This does not mean that one must remain steadfast until total truth is obtained. As Karl Popper pointed out, the key in some cases is moving toward the truth.[31]

Another form of the theoretical objection to interreligious dialogues draws upon the fact that dialogue does entail at least the possibility of local change, i.e., while the world-view is unaltered, an element of that world-view is impacted. While some dialogues may have a goal of changing someone's stance, there exist forms of meaningful dialogues in which the purpose is simply to clarify a position. Some may engage in a given dialogue in order

31 This emphasis is the point of contrast Popper makes regarding his falsificational model with the verificational model of the positivists. Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), part I.

to understand better their own position or possibly that of another tradition. However, it must be pointed out that even in these types of dialogue a change might occur. After all, I may have a particular stance on the faith-tradition X; I may believe X to be a false religion. That is, it does not lead to community with God as it proclaims. Furthermore, upon dialogue with a member of X, I may still believe X is false. However, I may now appreciate a particular aspect of that tradition such as their devotion to prayer. Hence, change has occurred. So the objection may be modified to suggest that "meaningful dialogue" may entail at least a local change, but does not entail a global change. So on one level, the theoretical objection may have raised an important point. Meaningful dialogue cannot take place with parties who are not willing to listen and learn from one another. This point seems to be true. Trust does not occur when individuals are not open to each other. Evangelicals must embrace a positive or optimistic stance toward interreligious dialogue in which they are willing to listen and learn from those of other traditions.

The second or practical objection to interreligious dialogue is equally forceful and is implied by the first objection. As a colleague pointed out, "Entering dialogue makes one vulnerable; dialogue really does involve the risk of hearing something that may indeed change us." As I engage in dialogue with a member of some other faith-tradition, I may discover a truth that I did not expect. Such vulnerability may lead to a global change or it may be more localized. I may discover that "they" are not at all the type of person they are portrayed to be by the media or my pastor. They are human beings like me. They face the same challenges of life as I do. They are committed to their faith-tradition just as I am. They are …, and the comparison goes on.

I may find the practical side of dialogue exposes me to new ideas that challenge my system; thus, making me vulnerable. As a result, the objection claims, those who are very committed to a given faith-tradition will not enter into dialogue. However, is it their being "very committed" that leads them to not engage in dialogue or is it their fear of being vulnerable or their fear of being asked a question for which they lack an answer or, possibly, their lack of confidence in their own message? Both of these objections, the theoretical and the practical, point to real issues; however, neither undercut the call for engaging in dialogue. While it may be the case that evangelicals have been reluctant to make themselves vulnerable, evangelicals are not any

different from other faithful members of a given faith-tradition. Most who are committed to some stance find change or vulnerability difficult. However, these objections do not undermine the proposal of engaging in meaningful dialogue with members of other faith-traditions.

Even so, there are other possible objections to the proposal for greater involvement by evangelicals in interreligious dialogue, and they may be introduced by the following questions.[32] Do such dialogues produce new converts? How can evangelicals rejoice in religious diversity, which is part of the mission statement for some interreligious dialogue groups?[33]

The first question may assume that the only legitimate activity for Christians, regarding the Great Commission, is evangelism. By their very nature, interreligious dialogues should not have "proselytizing" as their goal; however, interreligious dialogues and evangelism are not incompatible. Frequently, before evangelism can take place, objections, concerns, and misunderstandings must be addressed. In short, trust must be established. In our contemporary culture, there exist many whose world-view excludes necessary elements of a Christian perspective. Dialogue may lay a stage or provide a sort of 'pre-evangelism' that provides a world-view conducive to the gospel message. Dialogue may allow for the development of an understanding by a participant of a gracious, merciful, loving God. Furthermore, any pre-evangelism or evangelistic efforts must rest ultimately on an understanding that it is God who is sovereign and without God moving upon the heart of an individual, no true salvation will be realized. Our responsibility, from an evangelical perspective, is not to save anyone, but to be faithful and obedient, sharing the good news and allow God to do with our obedience what God chooses to do. Consequently, evangelicals, in spite of their emphasis on evangelism, must be content to engage in meaningful dialogue and to leave the results of that dialogue to God.

The second question is more problematic; how do evangelicals respond to religious diversity? Can evangelicals rejoice in the faith diversity of our

32 These questions were asked at an ETS meeting in response to my paper "Teaching Them to Obey: An Evangelical Theology of Religions" (November 2007).

33 For example the mission statement for the Fresno Multifaith Exchange reads: "1) The context of the program is one of rejoicing in the faith diversity of the Fresno community. …" (Revised June 2004).

communities? On the one hand, from an evangelical perspective, the contemporary diversity is a result of the fall, and evangelicals do not embrace the notion that all religious persons are necessarily worshiping the same God or traveling up the same mountain. From this perspective, rejoicing in diversity is problematic. However, as evangelicals within a fallen world, they are to be salt and to fulfill the Great Commission. From this perspective, they may rejoice that God has placed them in their current situations. God has provided a vehicle for fulfilling the mandate, and they can be thankful that, even in a fallen state, some still want to be engaged in God-talk. In a religiously diverse community, they can rejoice in God's sovereign providence. Harold Netland suggests that any adequate theology of religions must be capable of giving a theological explanation "for the sheer fact of human religiosity."[34] Evangelicals find that explanation in both the Creator and human nature. On the one hand, we were created in God's image, so it should not be surprising that we are a people who are religious. Second, this fact points to a sovereign God who is still present and active in the creation. If we are to rejoice in diversity, we can do so only in a state of humility. The act of evangelicals exhibiting humility as they engage those of other faith-traditions in dialogue illustrates a core of their basic theology. God is actively engaged in drawing the creation back to God and Jesus provides the model of how we, as persons, can best be part of God's activity.

In 1976, Dr. Hesselgrave challenged evangelicals to become engaged in interreligious dialogue. He said, "Unless as evangelicals we are willing to risk locking ourselves in a closet of monologue where we speak primarily to one another, the question for us is not, 'Shall we engage in dialogue?' but, 'In what kind of dialogue shall we engage?'"[35] Unfortunately, today in 2013, not only have evangelicals not decided what kind of dialogue in which to participate, they have not decided whether they want to get outside of their closet.

As evangelicals engage in dialogue, they face the opportunity to promote

34 Harold Netland, "Theology of religions, missiology, and evangelism," *Missiology: An International Review* 33 2 (2005, April): 145.

35 Hesselgrave, "Evangelicals and Interreligious Dialogue," 124. Dr. Hesselgrave identifies five types of dialogue: "1) Dialogue on the nature of interreligious dialogue. … 2) Interreligious dialogue that promotes freedom of worship and witness. … 3) Interreligious dialogue concerned with meeting human needs. … 4) Interreligious dialogue designed to break down barriers of distrust and hatred in the religious world. … 5) Interreligious dialogue that has as its objective the mutual comprehension of conflicting truth claims" (124-125).

justice through trust and become part of the solutions to some of our social problems. Furthermore, such activities reflect the ministry of Jesus. It does not promote the comfort that may be found in confronting those with whom we disagree with preplanned formal arguments that "prove" our point of view. When preparing for debates and confrontations, we frequently feel compelled to tie together all the loose ends; dialogue frequently forces us to accept the dynamics of loose ends. While dialogue, at times, may alleviate tension, it can preserve tension and vulnerability. It may allow individual Christians to advance justice and social affairs as they replicate divine action in which God engages individuals in such a way that highlights their value. As such, dialogue must be approached with a sense of awe, a sense of reverence, a sense of excitement as we watch God doing God-stuff. For the evangelical, philosophical theology is always about God and should lead to God. Since God is a Triune God who is not silent, who promises and who acts, we can expect God to fulfill God's mission in which we have the opportunity to participate as we replicate divine action.