A Critical Appraisal of Darryl G. Hart's Deconstruction of Evangelicalism

Matthew Wong

KEY WORDS

| Evangelicalism | evangelical | neo-evangelicalism | post-evangelicalism | coherence | ecclesiology | 18th Century | Protestantism | Modernism | Fundamentalism | Revivalism |

ABSTRACT

How one interprets the evangelical movement varies widely. For many, Evangelicalism has come to denote a wacky and sometimes brazen, intellectually inferior strain of Christianity. For others the term 'evangelical' is laden with negative connotations suggesting ill-informed fervour and strident belief. However, for self-professing evangelicals, and those sympathetic to the movement, Evangelicalism represents an authentic and pure expression of time-honoured biblical truth, grounded in the Word of God and genuine religious experience.

But what does the term 'evangelical' mean? How many people would be comfortable defining the movement or even tracking its development through the ages? According to Hart and other sceptics of Evangelicalism, difficulty defining the movement's core beliefs and precise nature is unsurprising, for it is essentially a theological mirage, an amorphous and ill-conceived relic of historic orthodox Protestantism. This paper will examine attempts to deconstruct the evangelical project and assess whether the movement should be abandoned due to theological shallowness or cherished as a vibrant and adaptive vehicle for conveying and giving expression to timeless Christian dogma. It is argued that the answer is more complex than initially meets the eye and lies somewhere in between these two positions.

INTRODUCTION

Evangelicalism is a vast, highly complex and influential movement. Current estimates place the number of evangelicals in the world at circa 660 million (2020), representing one in every four Christians.[1] This figure groups Pentecostal, Charismatic and Evangelical Christians together, whereas if counted separately, a more modest estimate would be circa 285.5 million (2011 Pew Forum data), representing 4.1% of the world's total population and 13.1% of the world's Christian population.[2] According to extensive research carried out by French researcher Sebastian Fath, Asia has the highest number of evangelical Christians (215 million), followed by Africa (185 million), South America (123 million), North America (107 million), Europe (23 million), and Oceania (7 million).[3] A worldwide, trans-denominational theological movement within Protestant Christianity, Evangelicalism emphasises the authority of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith

1 Sebastian Fath, 2020. [https://evangelicalfocus.com/print/5119/660-million-evangelicals-in-the-world] [accessed 21.2.22]

2 Per Forum, 2011. https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/ [accessed 21.2.22]

3 Sebastian Fath, 2020. [http://blogdesebastienfath.hautetfort.com/archive/2020/01/21/660-millions-d-evangeliques-en-2020-estimation-6207073.html] [accessed 21.2.22]. See also Aaron Earls, 2020, '3 in 5 Evangelicals Live in Asia or Africa,' *Lifeway Research* [https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/03/02/3-in-5-evangelicals-live-in-asia-or-africa/] [accessed 21.2.22]

alone, the need for personal conversion and believers' responsibility to reach others with the Gospel. The movement derives its name from the English word 'evangelical' which originates from the Greek εὐαγγέλιον ('gospel' or 'glad tidings').

Having its conception in the Reformation, Evangelicalism gained a distinct theological flavour and voice during the revivals that began in Britain and New England in the 1730s. Though the term 'evangelical' was used prior to the 18th century to refer to 'the gospel',[4] it was not until Wesley and Whitefield that the movement assumed a level of maturity and coming of age. Though many consider Evangelicalism a distinct theological movement with discernible emphases and mission goals, Evangelicalism's internal coherence has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years due to the emergence of new iterations embracing postmodern tendencies. Hart, who focuses on conservative Protestantism in the age of Billy Graham, rejects the mainstream consensus that regards contemporary Evangelicalism as a revivalistic, theologically conservative and richly historical movement. He provocatively writes "Evangelicalism needs to be relinquished as a religious identity because it does not exist. In fact, it is the wax nose of 20th Century American Protestantism. Behind this proboscis, which has been nipped and tucked by savvy religious leaders, academics and pollsters, is a face void of any discernible features."[5]

Hart has made a controversial and audacious claim, but is it true? This article begins by examining some attempts at defining Evangelicalism and outlines the complexities of this task. The arguments underpinning Hart's claim are first presented then discussed and evaluated under the headings 'incoherence', 'artificial construction' and 'ecclesiological deficiency'. It is argued that Hart fails to provide an adequate biblical and sociological definition of Evangelicalism and instead deconstructs the movement using a partisan framework. In so doing, he judges the theological validity of a vast and complex movement according to whether it aligns with a reformed outlook on doctrine and ecclesiology. Though Hart makes several compelling arguments against aberrative evangelical theology, it is also concluded that he needlessly dispenses the evangelical baby with the bathwater by failing to distinguish classical/orthodox from neo- and post-evangelical variants.

Incoherence

Hart's first line of evidence against the unity of evangelical identity is that Evangelicalism lacks conceptual clarity and internal coherence. He employs statements made by several scholars who have adopted a critical outlook towards contemporary Evangelicalism. For example, he cites Wells' assertion that "the only semblance of cohesion that now remains [in Evangelicalism] is simply tactical, never theological."[6] Hart and Wells are not alone in regarding Evangelicalism to be an insipid and theologically indistinct entity. Murray contends that much of Anglo-American Evangelicalism is biblically illiterate,[7] ditto McLoughlin who argues that revivalists have reduced Christianity "to a hard core of universally acknowledged fundamentals ... [and] in the course of explaining these truths they either reduced Christianity to banalities

4 Bebbington, 2004, 1.

5 Hart, 2004, 16-17.

6 Wells, David F. *No Place for Truth: Or whatever happened to Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 133 in Hart, 2004, 14.

7 Murray, Iain H. *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000*. Banner of Truth Trust, 2000 in Hart, 2004, 15.

or inflated it to vagaries."[8] Hart also cites Noll's statement that traditional definitions of Evangelicalism lack "conceptual clarity"[9] so that "the pieces... never fit together exactly..."[10] and Brown's assertion that Evangelicalism is willing to overlook doctrinal differences by building the movement upon a "common denominator of pietistic tendencies and revivalist fervor."[11] Hart therefore concludes that Evangelicalism is in the midst of an identity crisis that stems from the movement's lack of "an institutional centre, intellectual coherence, and devotional direction."[12]

Artificial Construction

An artificial construction may be defined as an engineered, reactionary entity that ultimately has its origins with human design, will and intellect. In stark contrast to the Church, which was organically birthed at Pentecost as a corporate and spiritual entity through the work of the Holy Spirit and God's redemptive plan, Hart maintains that contemporary Evangelicalism was constructed by post-WWII neo-evangelicals and subsequently heralded as a conservative alternative to mainline liberal Protestantism following the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy of the 1920s-30s.[13] Key underpinnings of this 'artificial construction' included the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947) and 'Christianity Today' (1956).[14] By 1976, Hart writes "the renovation was complete";[15] Evangelicalism – whilst "tapping conservative Protestantism's devotion and faith" – was now branded *anti-fundamentalist*.[16] Hart identifies the chief architects of this evangelical construction[17] as "the historians, sociologists and pollsters of American religion"[18] who helped forge an insipid, amorphous and nondescript brand of Evangelicalism. The scholar also contends that prior to this 'artificial' construction in the mid-20th Century, orthodox Protestantism was essentially evangelical Protestantism.[19] He writes "To be a member or officer in one of the largest and oldest American Protestant denominations was to be an evangelical."[20]

Ecclesiological Deficiency

Simply put, ecclesiology is the theological study of the nature and structure of the Christian Church. As theology is largely drawn along denominational lines, it is unsurprising that evangelicals belonging to various denominational traditions should have differing theological outlooks. Hart, as a reformed Presbyterian, attaches much importance to the denominational life of the church and views denominations as superstructures that support and provide theological coherence to the rich tapestry of orthodox Protestant belief. In voicing a healthy respect for and seeking to preserve robust denominationalism, Hart regards parachurch influences and pan-

8 McLoughlin, Jr., William G. *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham*. New York: Ronald Press, 1959, 524 in Hart, 2004, 45.

9 Noll, Mark A. *Between faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, 2 in Hart, 2004, 50.

10 Noll, M.A. *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 5 in Hart, 2004, 50.

11 Brown, Harold O.J. 'Evangelicalism in America', *Dialog*, 24 (1986) 1986, 191 in McCune, 2003, 89.

12 Hart, 2004, 176.

13 Ibid.,190; McCune, 1998, 22.

14 Hart, 2004, 13.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.,18.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 20.

20 Ibid.

denominationalism as constituting an affront on the ecclesiological integrity of orthodox Christianity. He therefore equates non-denominationalism with an insipid, watered-down strain of Christianity; one that advocates a lowest-common-denominator faith predicated on overlooking theological differences instead of uniting over biblical distinctives.

Hart argues that Evangelicalism's ecclesiology has been severely weakened by the movement's propensity to "take members from diverse denominations and independent congregations and stitch them together into a recognizable quilt."[21] According to Hart, this act of denominational pilfering is "a parasite on historic Christian communions"[22] and creates a false impression of church growth. Hart accuses the parachurch movement of falsely regarding "ecclesial expressions of Protestantism as synonymous with nominal Christianity."[23] According to Hart, the growth of the parachurch movement "made plausible a faith that relied on voluntary assent and entrepreneurial genius";[24] one that considered orthodox Protestantism to be "too formal, cumbersome and elitist."[25] By eschewing "creeds", "structures of governance", "accountability, liturgy, discipleship and diaconal assistance,"[26] Evangelicalism embraced "pious individualism, mass appeal, religious experience and pragmatic techniques for communicating the Gospel."[27] Hart thus concludes that contemporary Evangelicalism "leans toward abstraction" rather than embracing "the concrete forms of give-and-take involved in congregational and denominational life."[28]

WHAT IS EVANGELICALISM?

Evangelicalism is a term derived from the word 'evangelical' which originates from the Greek εὐαγγέλιον meaning 'gospel' or 'glad tidings' (Luke 2:10).[29] The Gospel, according to 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4, is that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures," thereby providing sinful mankind with a way of redemption.[30] As such, Evangelicalism derives its theological mandate from Scriptures that exhort believers to proclaim Christ's atoning sacrifice at Calvary (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; 4:10-12).

According to Bebbington and Noll, Evangelicalism originated amongst Moravians and Wesley due to a preoccupation with assurance[31] and zeal for a dynamic, heartfelt religion.[32] Its supporters eschewed the stale traditionalism and formalism of contemporary/established Protestantism[33] by embracing pietistic passion, missionary vigour, and spiritual fervour. A mix of pietism, Puritanism and 'holy living' in Germany, Europe and the Anglosphere paved the way for the likes of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. Emphasised was the pressing need for personal conversion and genuine repentance which led to missionary zeal both within and outside denominational confines. Such qualities were embodied in the 18th century Great Awakening

21 Ibid., 30.
22 Hart, 2004, 32.
23 Ibid.,117.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Hart, 2004,124.
27 Ibid.,118.
28 Ibid., 125.
29 Sweeney, 2005, 17.
30 Elwell, 2001, 406.
31 Bebbington, 2004, 42.
32 Noll, 2001, 9.
33 Ibid.

in British America, sowing the seeds for the 19th century Second Great Awakening in America which provides the historical background to Hart's thesis.

Tidball likens the task of propositionally defining evangelical theology to attempting to pick up a slippery bar of soap.[34] As a living and 'lived out' theology, Evangelicalism lends itself to analysis via what it proclaims and not by internal systematisation of its beliefs. This sentiment is reflected in Holmes' contention: "There is no British, still less any European, evangelical theology, if by that is meant an identifiable commonly held and distinctive position; instead there is an on-going conversation…"[35]

According to church historian and professing evangelical David Bebbington, however, evangelical theology has traditionally placed an emphasis on 'biblicism', 'conversionism', 'crucicentrism', and 'activism'.[36] He defines 'biblicism' as Evangelicalism's "devotion to the Bible... their [evangelicals'] belief that all spiritual truth is to be found in its pages";[37] 'conversionism' or 'the call to conversion' as "the content of the gospel", namely the belief that human beings need to be converted;[38] 'crucicentrism' as the doctrine of the cross, specifically the preeminent importance assigned to the atonement by evangelicals;[39] and 'activism' as the desire to see the "conversion of others."[40]

Tidball argues that Bebbington's 'Quadrilateral' is the closest we have to a consensus definition[41] whilst Knowles lauds its brevity and succinctness,[42] declaring it to be the "yardstick by which Evangelicalism can be measured."[43] The definition's acceptance is not universal however, and though it has been widely praised for sidestepping controversial theological specifics,[44] it is derided by McCune who laments its propensity to reduce Evangelicalism to "an amorphous blob of religion" by consigning doctrinal details to the periphery of irrelevance.[45] Similarly, Carson writes "because the four points of the Quadrilateral are so general, the precise nature of evangelical conflict with theological alternatives is sometimes obscured".[46]

Larsen, whilst acknowledging the Quadrilateral's popularity, also criticises what he perceives to be its excessive doctrinal latitude. He argues that the Quadrilateral must be 'fleshed out' and contextualised if the evangelical label is to maintain its theological distinctiveness.[47] To illustrate his point, Larsen observes how the Catholic friar and preacher St. Francis of Assisi is an 'evangelical' under the Quadrilateral's rubric.[48] His 'Rule', for example, is derived from Scripture quotations ('biblicism'); he claimed to have a dramatic conversion experience ('conversionism'); he commissioned fellow friars to preach amongst the people and attend to their physical needs ('activism'); and he affirmed belief in stigmata

34 Tidball, 1994, 12.

35 Holmes, Stephen. "British (and European) Evangelical Theologies," in Larsen and Treier (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 256.

36 Bebbington, 2005, 2-3.

37 Ibid., 12.

38 Ibid., 5.

39 Ibid., 14.

40 Ibid., 10.

41 Tidball, 1994, 14.

42 Knowles, 2010, 1.

43 Ibid.

44 Hutchinson, 2012, 17.

45 McCune, 2003, 99.

46 Carson, 2002, 450.

47 Larsen, 2007, 2.

48 Ibid.

('crucicentrism').[49]

Similarly, Carson expresses dissatisfaction with the Quadrilateral's exclusive focus on what is distinctive as opposed to what is of crucial importance.[50] He argues that because the Quadrilateral does not specifically mention Christology or the Trinity, one might gain the impression that evangelicals do not care for such matters.[51] Larsen[52] attempts to rectify these deficiencies and defines an evangelical as: an orthodox Protestant; one who accords with the 18th Century revivalist movements; one who submits to the Bible's inspired and divine truth as the sole authority for all aspects of faith and practice; one who regards Christ's atonement as the only way in which sinful man can be reconciled to God; and one who stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, sanctification and evangelism.[53] Larsen's 'Pentagon' thus touches on three additional elements omitted by Bebbington: Trinitarian Nicene orthodoxy, 18th Century revivalism and an emphasis on Pneumatology; the latter being a key distinctive of evangelical Christianity that asserts the importance of the Holy Spirit in conversion and the subsequent life of faith.[54]

For the purpose of this article, neo-evangelicalism or 'new Evangelicalism' – the subject of Hart's critique – is taken to refer to the evangelical wing that resulted from the anti-fundamentalist movement in early-mid 20th century America, and which stressed direct engagement with culture and in some instances, theological cooperation with liberal Christian groups. Though neo-evangelicals held to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, they nonetheless sought to steer a middle course between the separatist dogmatism of the Fundamentalists and the rejection of doctrinal and biblical authority espoused by the Modernists. Neo-evangelicals began to embrace modern scholarship to engage the prevailing culture directly, constructively, and in an intellectually credible manner. Today, however, the term neo-evangelical/neo-evangelicalism is largely defunct, having served its historical purpose, and has been replaced by the umbrella term 'evangelical'. Neo-evangelicalism is still used by critics of the movement to distinguish between a credible (classical 18th century evangelicalism) and 'lite' (neo-evangelical) version of Evangelicalism; the latter epitomising, in the eyes of its critics, a 'lowest common denominator' faith riddled with reductionist tendencies.

IS EVANGELICALISM INCOHERENT?

Scholars have long since observed Evangelicalism's theological diversity; in particular the way in which the term 'evangelical' is employed. Noll notes how 'evangelical' may refer to: someone who believes the good news of the gospel; a Protestant during the Reformation; the nexus of Protestant movements established in 18th century Britain and its empire; 18th century revival movements associated with Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards that paved the way for 19th – 20th century revivalists such as Finney, Moody and Graham; and one who adheres to certain doctrinal convictions and exhibits particular religious outlooks.[55]

Because Evangelicalism was never a unified,

49 Ibid.

50 Carson, 2002, 450.

51 Ibid.

52 Larsen, 2007,1.

53 Ibid., 3-10.

54 Ibid., 10.

55 Noll, 2001, 13.

much less monolithic movement,[56] some scholars are reluctant to define evangelical theology in creedal/confessional[57] or propositional terms. Instead, there is a trend towards defining Evangelicalism using qualitative terms to capture the movement's essential character.[58] Gillie typifies this qualitative approach when he writes "Our bond is a common experience, not a unanimous interpretation of that experience; a common devotion to our Lord, not an exact statement concerning His mysterious yet all-sufficient work."[59] Johnston also circumnavigates Evangelicalism's 'definitional impasse'[60] by observing how the movement should be likened to "a large, extended family."[61] Still others such as Webber have attempted to define Evangelicalism *taxonomically* by identifying sixteen American "evangelical species",[62] whilst Smith and Tidball have defined the movement *metaphorically* by employing such terms as "evangelical mosaic"[63], "evangelical kaleidoscope"[64], "an extended family; a twelve ring circus in which various different acts are performed; a coat of many colours; a family tree with different branches drawing from the same roots; ... a patchwork quilt."[65]

Rather than employing a set of narrow definitional terms,[66] Lints argues that Evangelicalism must instead be defined as a diversity of theological frameworks[67] governed by "cultural, institutional and personal factors."[68] Similarly, Greggs comments that Evangelicalism is less about theological statements and propositional truth, and more about a pious theological framework.[69] The difficulty in propositionally defining evangelical theology has led Dayton to call for a moratorium on the evangelical label which he considers "theologically incoherent, sociologically confusing, and ecumenically harmful."[70] His sentiment is echoed by Horton and Hart, the former arguing that debates over evangelical identity are a waste of time and energy,[71] the latter concluding that Evangelicalism lacks any distinctive characteristics.[72]

Tidball maintains, however, that theological diversity does not necessarily imply incoherency, the scholar observing how different varieties of Evangelicalism often adhere to a central core of evangelical dogma. Noll reaches a similar conclusion, noting that "evangelical traits

56 Elwell, 2001 407.

57 McCune, 2003, 95.

58 Lints, Richard. *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 30-31 in Carson, 2002, 454.

59 Gillie, R.C. *Evangelicalism: Has it a future?* London, Cassel, 1912, 11-24 in Hutchinson, 2012, 10.

60 Johnston, Robert. "American Evangelicalism: An Extended Family," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (ed. Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston), Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,1991, 252-72 in Sweeney, 2005, 21.

61 Ibid. Johnston overlooks the fact that many of the world's religions and cults display strong family resemblances.

62 Webber, Robert E. *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 31-33 in Sweeney, 2005, 20.

63 Smith, Timothy L. "The Evangelical Kaleidoscope and the Call to Christian Unity," *Christian Scholar's Review* 15 (1986), 125-140 in Sweeney, 2005, 21.

64 Ibid.

65 Tidball, 1994, 19-20.

66 Lints, Richard. *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 30 in Carson, 2002, 454.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Grenz, S.J. *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IL: IVP, 1993), 62 in Greggs, 2010, 6.

70 Dayton, Donald. *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (ed. Donald Dayton and Robert Johnston), Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press,1991, 251 in Sweeney, 2005, 21 .

71 Horton, Michael. "The Battle over the Label 'Evangelical,'" *Modern Reformation* 10, no. 2 (March/April 2001):16 in Sweeney, 2005, 23.

72 Hart, 2004, 17 in Pettegrew, 2006, 161.

have never by themselves yielded cohesive, institutionally compact, or clearly demarcated groups of Christians. But they do serve to identify a large family of churches and religious enterprises."[73]

But can metaphors *explain* the diversity that exists within Evangelicalism and show whether the movement is coherent or not? Stone argues that attempts to encapsulate the essence of evangelical diversity via metaphors are futile as figurative language is purely descriptive, not explanatory.[74] Specifically, he notes how the "mosaic" and "kaleidoscope" metaphors are incapable of explaining *why* evangelical diversity exists.[75] Though metaphors may help draw attention to similar observed features, the important questions of why and how these features function remain unanswered.[76] According to Stone, evangelicals' reliance upon metaphors to define their movement reveals a deep uncertainty over what they believe; the scholar adopting a similar position to Hart by affirming that Evangelicalism is a fiction that cannot withstand analytical scrutiny.[77]

The rise of ecumenism and postmodernism within the evangelical church – particularly in the realms of apologetics, homiletics, ecclesiology, and missiology – has undoubtedly done much to precipitate a destructive theological inclusivity. Though Hart does not refer to the rise of post-evangelicalism, a brief discussion of its rationale and guiding principles are herewith included to exemplify a movement that, unlike classical and neo-evangelical strains, is *truly* incoherent and lacking conceptual clarity. For all its shortfalls and propensity to engage in reductionist oversimplification, neo-evangelical belief largely cohered around key orthodox tenets and espoused evangelistic zeal, albeit in new and innovative ways via engagement with culture, the academy and wider society. A willingness to rally around key biblical principles in a coherent manner is conspicuously absent in the post-evangelicalism of the late 20th century; and it is to this iteration our focus now turns.

'EVANGELICAL' POSTMODERNISM/POST-EVANGELICALISM: AN EXCURSUS

Famously defined by Jean-François Lyotard as "incredulity towards meta-narratives";[78] postmodernism constitutes a pervasive attack on the epistemological foundations of Evangelicalism. By embracing experientialism and doubt,[79] Wilkin observes how evangelical postmoderns are increasingly abandoning the Bible's teachings on everlasting life, justification by faith alone, the immortality of the soul, and Jesus' substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection.[80] Postmoderns, such as Brian McLaren, exhibit few *sine qua nons*;[81] their insistence that "systems mean nothing and only exist in order to perpetuate the belief systems of those who created them"[82] reveals an entrenched disillusionment with attempts to systematise biblical truth, leading to perspectivism and relativism. By spurning the concept of propositional/absolute truth in favour of pluralistic relativism and deconstructionism,

73 Noll, 2001, 13.

74 Stone, 1997, 4.

75 Ibid., 5.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 2-3.

78 Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge. In Theory and History of Literature* (vol. 10). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, 24.

79 Wilkin, 2007, 3.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Pettegrew, 2006, 164.

'evangelical' postmodernism can never constitute a theologically coherent movement; indeed, it proudly revels in this fact.

The Emergent Church Movement is a prime example of 'evangelical' postmodernism. Gaining ascendancy in the early 1990s as a reaction to America's conservative Christian subculture,[83] it has since been embraced by much of North America, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.[84] Specifically targeting the younger generation, most 'emergents' exhibit what King describes as "postmodern views on truth and epistemology."[85] According to Kimball, they are questioning traditional conservative understandings of biblical community and social justice in attempts to postmodernise the Gospel message for today's society.[86]

Bielo and Payne attribute the rise of emergent theology to a white, male, well-educated middle-class,[87] one that surpassed its parents' educational achievements in the 1960s, leading to a mass relocation to the cities and suburbs.[88] As the affluence and social status of these evangelicals increased, they began to embrace political activity and social concerns.[89] A nascent emergent theology is evident in "*The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals*" (1977) which expressed a desire to "recapture the mystery of worship, the power of symbols, and the continuity with tradition";[90] and the 1994 publication "*Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*" which stressed a "more inclusive and ultimately more historic Christianity"[91] alongside a pledge to reinstate a sense of mystery that ought, in the authors' words, to accompany worship.[92]

Emergent theology is notoriously hard to define; its diversity and ideological pluralism has led some scholars to regard it as a conversation.[93] Its nebulous nature is embodied by one of its leading figures, Brian McLaren, who identifies himself, amongst other things, as "Missional", "*Evangelical*" [my emphasis], "Liberal/Conservative", "Mystical/Poetic", "Catholic", "Green" and "Emergent."[94] Beneath the evangelical facade of the Emerging Church lies, according to Pettegrew, eight themes: a "friendly attitude towards science"; a "willingness to re-examine beliefs concerning the work of the Holy Spirit"; a "more 'tolerant' attitude toward varying views on eschatology"; "a shift away from so-called extreme Dispensationalism"; "an increased emphasis on scholarship"; "a more definite recognition of social responsibility"; "a re-opening of the subject of biblical inspiration" and "a growing willingness of evangelical theologians to converse with liberal theologians."[95]

According to King, these eight themes fall into three categories: methodological, philosophical and theological.[96] Methodologically, Emerging Churches often

83 Bielo, 2011, 5, 197.

84 Asumang, 2010, 114.

85 King, 2005, 27.

86 Kimball, D. *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 18 in King, 2005, 27.

87 Bielo, 2011, 5.

88 Payne, 2003, 47.

89 Ibid. It must be noted, however, that Evangelicalism has a distinguished and longstanding interest in social issues e.g., the Abolitionist movement in the 18th -19th century.

90 Shelton, 2004, 45.

91 Ibid. 47.

92 Ibid.

93 Pettegrew, 2006, 165.

94 McLaren, B.D. (2004). *A Generous Orthodoxy*… Zondervan.

95 Pettegrew, 2006, 160.

96 King, 2005, 31-32.

reject traditional orders of service in favour of a more 'organic' approach that includes times of quiet contemplation, visual presentations, thoroughly modern worship, open sharing and freedom of movement.[97] Carson and McCune also observe the Emerging Church's obsession with consumer and marketing mentality, seeker-sensitive approaches,[98] church growth strategies, Christian self-esteem-ism, and psychotherapeutic techniques.[99] Unhappiness becomes the new theodicy for modern evangelicals; an approach that grants a teaching/practice legitimacy based on whether it meets the perceived needs of the congregation (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3-4).[100]

Philosophically, the Emerging Church adopts multisensory worship[101] that combines freedom of movement with icons, props and symbols, candles, incense, prayer labyrinths, prayer stations, liturgy, meditative and contemplative techniques and dimmed lighting to blend both ancient and future expressions of faith.[102] To achieve its objective of creating 'sacred spaces' that radiate a sense of "awe, wonder and transcendence,"[103] Bader-Saye observes how emergent theology has appropriated images and sacramentalism from the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican traditions,[104] reversing the efforts of the Reformers who sought to rid the Church of Romanism.[105] In line with postmodern thought, many "emergents" espouse relativism, pluralism and experientialism at the expense of biblical exegesis. McLaren writes "The ultimate Bible study or sermon in recent decades yielded clarity. That clarity, unfortunately, was often boring – and probably not that accurate, either, since reality is seldom clear, but usually fuzzy and mysterious ... How about a congregation who may not have 'captured the meaning' of the text, but a text that captured the imagination and curiosity of the congregation?"[106] McLaren's hermeneutic may thus be described as 'textually autonomous', 'eisegetical' and 'relativistic', declaring that meaning no longer resides in the text itself but in the reader's imagination.

Though seeking to engage with contemporary culture and unchurched youth, emergent theology contravenes Evangelicalism's 'theological blueprint' by downplaying the importance of biblical exegesis in favour of experientialism and eisegesis (contra 'biblicism' and Larsen's '18th Century Revivalism'). Its emphasis on church growth techniques rather than biblical conversion, and its pluralistic attitude towards other religions, shows scant regard for 'conversionism' and the message of the cross ('crucicentrism'). Additionally, in attempting to reach the unchurched through seeker-friendly dialogue, the importance of biblical evangelism is further undermined. Evangelical missiologist David Hesselgrave notes that ecumenical dialogue is predicated on syncretistic and debased views of revelation, Christology and Soteriology.[107] He asserts

97 King, 2005, 44.

98 Carson, 2002, 467.

99 McCune, 1999, 92; Carson, 2002, 465.

100 Carson, 2002, 467.

101 King, 2005, 44.

102 Webber, R.E. (1999). *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, Baker Academic.

103 King, 2005, 44.

104 Bader-Saye, Scott. "The Emergent Matrix," *Christian Century* 121/24 (November 2004): 21 in Pettegrew, 2006, 168.

105 Pettegrew, 2006, 168.

106 McLaren, B. in Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (El Cajon, California: Youth Specialties, 2003), 73 in Pettegrew, 2006, 171.

107 Hesselgrave, D. "Interreligious Dialogue – Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives," *Theology and Mission* (ed. D. Hesselgrave; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 229 in Muck, 1993, 520.

that dialogue should seek to demonstrate the superiority of the biblical worldview over and against others, respond to unbelievers' questions/objections, proclaim the atoning sacrifice and resurrection of Christ as the answer to man's separation from God, and thus exhort men to repent and exercise faith in Christ.[108] Ecumenical dialogue contravenes Evangelicalism's 'theological blueprint' by advocating dialogue that seeks to 'change' or 'find truth'; conversing without any appeal to absolute truth or any intent to evangelise (contra 'activism'). The Gospel is thus compromised and made more palatable to a postmodern worldview; a far cry from the burning evangelistic zeal of Wesley, Whitefield and Edwards (contra Larsen).

REVISITING HART'S CLAIM THAT EVANGELICALISM IS THEOLOGICALLY INCOHERENT

The case for theological incoherence is undoubtedly strong in a post-evangelical (and hyper-charismatic[109]) context; demonstrated by a rejection of key distinctives encapsulated in both Bebbington and Larsen's definitions of Evangelicalism. But what about the focus of Hart's critique, that neo-evangelicalism is theologically incoherent? Up until the rise of 'evangelical' postmodernism, Tidball contends that classical Western Evangelicalism enjoyed a rich historical and theological pedigree. He likens Evangelicalism to a growing boy who matures into an adult whilst observing that it is the same person throughout this developmental period.[110] Similarly, though McGrath regards the Fundamentalist era in North America as a period of intellectual shallowness,[111] he nonetheless concurs with Tidball that Evangelicalism exhibits a high degree of intellectual coherence.[112] He warns against the dangers of anti-intellectualism by denouncing the "pompous posturing"[113] and "élitism of academic theology"[114] whilst extolling the merits of an intellectually-grounded yet thoroughly practical evangelical theology.[115]

Whereas classical, pietistic and fundamentalist variants of Evangelicalism[116] all exhibited diversity, they nonetheless centred on the innate sinfulness of unredeemed humanity, justification by faith alone, the unique

108 Ibid.

109 Whilst not all evangelicals affirm a Pentecostal or Charismatic Pneumatology, most renewalists would classify themselves as evangelical. Moreover, whereas 'hyper-charismaticism' tends to be a predominantly renewalist phenomenon, not all renewalists are 'hyper-charismatic'. Caveats aside, the unprecedented growth of Pentecostalism has undoubtedly been accompanied by much spiritual abuse, grandstanding and hype within the modern evangelical church. Though seeking to redress the theological barrenness of a dry, purely intellectual faith, the Word of Faith movement, which is particularly prevalent within Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, contravenes Evangelicalism's 'theological blueprint' by rejecting Scripture's authority as the sole plumbline for faith and practice. Proponents typically de-emphasise the traditional evangelical approach to evangelism, that of accurately expounding and proclaiming the Scriptures (Acts 18:28; 28:23-24) in favour of anti-intellectualism, experientialism and 'signs and wonders' that can be counterfeited by Satan (Matt. 7:22-23; 2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15; 1 Tim. 4:1) (contra 'conversionism' and 'activism'). This often results in believers being exposed to transcendental, occultic and metaphysical influences. Passages such as Gen. 12:1-3; Gal. 3:7-9, 11-14 are often exploited to teach material prosperity rather than soteriological blessing (contra 'biblicism' and 'conversionism'), resulting in believers' financial, emotional and spiritual exploitation. Blasphemous and heretical views on the atonement further contravene 'crucicentrism' and taken collectively pose a grave challenge to the evangelical movement today.

110 Tidball, 1994, 31.

111 McGrath, 1996, 10. Marsden (1980, 7) disagrees, noting how Fundamentalists "stood in an intellectual tradition that had the highest regard for understanding of true scientific method and proper rationality."

112 McGrath, 1996, 242.

113 Ibid., 17.

114 Ibid., 18.

115 McGrath, 1996, 20.

116 Dorrien, Gary. *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1998, 2-3 in Pettegrew, 2006, 162, 159.

redemptive work of Christ, and the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.[117] That some quarters of Evangelicalism have displayed a profound disregard for such doctrinal bedrock[118] should not tarnish the reputation of historical or classical Evangelicalism. The focus of Hart's denouncement is modern Evangelicalism in the age of Billy Graham, and yet it has been shown that accusations of theological incoherence and even vacuity can only be fairly levelled at post-evangelicalism with its antagonism towards propositional truth, notwithstanding the fact that neo-evangelicalism precipitated some, if not much, of contemporary Evangelicalism's theological decline.

Hart is correct to draw attention to many shortfalls in the neo-evangelical movement, including rampant heteropraxis. He observes how American pollsters, such as Barna, Gallup and Christianity Today,[119] were guilty of breaking down profound religious truth into bite-size, sound-bite questions.[120] Consequently, American citizens were all too easily encouraged to identify themselves as 'evangelical.'[121] One U.S. poll for example found that more than 80% of respondents believed that Jesus Christ is divine, and 84% believed that the Ten Commandments must be observed today.[122] Such statistics, however, were accompanied by rapidly declining standards of morality amongst professing evangelicals.[123]

Traditionally, evangelicals have expressed a pietistic desire to live their lives in conformity with the written Word of God. Collins terms this commitment 'orthokardia';[124] denoting the close relationship between orthodoxy ('ortho') and orthopraxy ('kardia'). Sider, however, argues that this is simply no longer the case and accuses American Christianity of being committed to mammon, sex and self-ambition.[125] A similar observation is made by Horton who states that evangelical Christians are just as likely to pursue a lifestyle every bit as hedonistic as the general populace.[126]

According to Barna's data, American evangelicals have the same divorce rate as the rest of the population;[127] are cohabiting more frequently in the Bible Belt than in surrounding areas;[128] are failing *en masse* to abstain from pre-marital sex;[129] and are frequently subjecting their wives to physical and sexual abuse.[130] Sider concludes that this scandalous behaviour, committed by professing evangelicals, is a festering sore on the reputation of the American evangelical movement.[131] It therefore comes as little surprise that a Barna poll should reveal

117 Hutchinson, 2012, 10.

118 See for example "Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment."

119 Hart, 2004, 99, 85-106.

120 Ibid., 106.

121 Ibid.

122 "The Christianity Today-Gallup Poll: An Overview," *Christianity Today*, 21 December 1979, 1668. However, Hart (2004, 94) observes how the same poll reveals that only five out of ten respondents could identify as many as five of the Ten Commandments.

123 See Sider, 2005.

124 Collins, 2005, 91.

125 Sider, 2005, 13.

126 Horton, M. "Beyond Culture Wars," *Modern Reformation* (May-June 1993), 3 in Ibid., 13.

127 According to Sider, a 1999 Barna poll revealed that US evangelicals had the same divorce rate (25%) as the national average (The Barna Group in Sider, 2005, 19).

128 1990s census data revealed that increased rates of people cohabiting in Oklahoma (97%), Arkansas (125%) and Tennessee (123%) were substantially higher than the nationwide increase of 72% (New York Times, May 21, 2001, A14 in Sider, 2005, 22).

129 Only 12% of teenagers who pledged to abstain from pre-marital sex in the True Love Waits programme in 1993 (12,000 people) had kept their pledge seven years later (Altman, Lawrence K. "Study Finds That Teenage Virginity Pledges Are Rarely Kept," *New York Times*, March 10, 2004, A20 in Sider, 2005, 22-3).

130 Sider, 2005, 26.

131 Ibid., 28.

that only 22% of non-Christians have a positive view of evangelicals.[132] Whilst Sider is correct in observing how statistics on evangelicals' behaviour improve significantly once the term 'evangelical' is more rigorously defined, the enormity of this 'scandal of the evangelical conscience' remains.[133]

Carnal evangelicals who flagrantly sin undermine Evangelicalism's 'theological blueprint' by demonstrating a profound disregard for the authority of Scripture, tarnishing the witness and reputation of the Church (contra 'biblicism') by failing to take Scripture's command to live a holy and sanctified life seriously (contra Larsen's emphasis on Nicene orthodoxy and Pneumatology). Additionally, evangelicals who choose to live in conformity with the world are the inverse of 18th Century revivalists who chose to live holy, zealous and pious lives (contra Larsen). Whilst such statistics noted in the paragraph above are shocking, polling itself should not be regarded as the acid test of whether coherent, orthodox evangelical belief exists. Rather, polling (when employing rigorously defined terms) may indicate a lack of obedience to traditional evangelical belief but cannot itself be used as evidence against the movement's coherence. The fact that many Catholics do not follow their faith in belief or moral behaviour does not, in theory, mean that Catholicism lacks internal coherence. Rather, the issue is one of personal adherence, namely a disconnect between belief and practice.

132 The Barna Group, The Barna Update, "Surprisingly Few Adults Outside of Christianity Have Positive Views of Christians," December 3, 2002 in Sider, 2005, 28.

133 Sider, 2005, 28.

CONDITIONAL COHERENCE

According to Tidball, accusations of theological 'fuzziness' are unfair namely because Evangelicalism, though culturally adaptable and dynamic, maintains a central core of belief.[134] Citing Bray, he contends that Evangelicalism's coherency is comparable to an unsolved Rubik's cube whose three dimensions ['denominational variety,' 'spirituality' and 'church type'] produce a plethora of theological permutations, all uniting around four evangelical distinctives ['authority of Scripture,' 'flexibility,' 'spiritual unity,' and 'importance of doctrine'].[135] Theological diversity does not, therefore, imply incoherence. As Noll states, [Evangelicalism] "has always been *diverse*, *flexible*, *adaptable*, and *multiform*,"[136] a view supported by Elwell who describes the movement as an assortment of emphases predicated on a core nexus of belief.[137]

In summary, Hart's assertion that Evangelicalism is theologically vacuous falls short on three counts: (1) whilst Hart is justified in defending the pre-eminence of biblical truth, orthodox belief and practice, his accusation of theological incoherence should be reserved for post-evangelicalism and to a much lesser extent neo-evangelicalism – the former proudly eschewing metanarratives and attempts at systematisation (2) though he rightly draws attention to the disconnect between evangelical belief and practice, the fact that evangelical practice does not always align with evangelical belief is not itself proof that Evangelicalism is incoherent (3) Hart's criticism demonstrates a

134 Tidball, 1994, 31.

135 Bray, G. 'What is the Church? An Ecclesiology for Today.' In *Restoring the Vision: Anglican Evangelicals Speak Out* (ed. Melvin Tinker). MARC, Eastbourne, 1990, 194-98 in Tidball, 1994, 157-60.

136 Noll, 2001, 14.

137 Elwell, 2001, 409.

lack of nuance by failing to identify classical/fundamentalist and neo-evangelical strains of Evangelicalism. He consequently runs the risk of tarnishing the entire movement by failing to distinguish different developmental phases.

It is concluded that with every advancing phase in the evangelical project, levels of theological coherence diminish. From Revivalist and Fundamentalist Evangelicalism (highly coherent) to neo-evangelicalism (less coherent due to cultural engagement and a jettisoning of 'cultic trappings' such as literalism and dispensationalism), to post-evangelicalism (incoherent due to postmodernist obeyance), Evangelicalism has been haemorrhaging doctrinal solidarity ever since it split from Fundamentalism. Though this author cannot agree with Hart's claim in its entirety that neo-evangelicalism was theologically vacuous and incoherent (it did adhere to core Christian fundamentals), it is indisputable that in seeking to be more outward oriented and socially engaged, neo-evangelicalism forfeited a considerable amount of internal theological rigour and definitional precision. More will be said about evangelical distinctives in the proceeding section where an attempt is made to contextualise the neo-evangelical movement historically and theologically.

IS EVANGELICALISM AN ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCTION?

Marsden helpfully identifies four key stages in the history of American Evangelicalism:

1. Orthodox Protestantism (1876-1918)
2. Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy (1919-1929)
3. Anti-Fundamentalism (1929-1940s)
4. Neo-Evangelicalism (1940s-1970s).[138]

Added to these might be the 'Methodist era' of the 18th century, the holiness movement of the mid-late 19th century, the 'Pentecostal 'charismatic" era of the 20th century concurrent with the rise of neo-evangelicalism, and the ascendance of post-evangelicalism in the 1990s. It is interesting to note that today, Evangelicalism has its axis in Africa, Asia and Latin America denoting a shift from Europe and North America.

Hart and McCune insist that neo-evangelicalism was artificially constructed during the fundamentalist-modernist controversy[139] of the 1930s. They observe how classical Evangelicalism was hijacked by modernists/anti-fundamentalists who sought to construct a theological middle-ground by avoiding the pitfalls of Fundamentalism on the one hand and Liberalism on the other.[140] The 'neo-evangelical' architects of this construction[141] thus sought to distance themselves from Fundamentalism's "fragmentation, segregation, separation, criticism, censoriousness, suspicion, solecism..."[142] In the 1940s-50s, leading neo-evangelical figures such as Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, Charles Fuller, Harold Lindsell and Billy Graham established the National Association of Evangelicals (1942),[143] Fuller Theological

138 Marsden, George M. 'From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism'. In The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They are Changing (ed. Wells, D.F., Woodbridge, J.D.). Nashville: Abingdon, 1973, 122 in McCune, 1998, 21. The 1974 Lausanne Congress was also a watershed moment in the movement's history marking a move away from old fundamentalist core beliefs towards greater inclusivity (neo-evangelicalism).

139 Hart, 2004, 18, 21; McCune, 1998, 22; McCune, 2003, 93.

140 Hart, 2004, 25; Yong, 2002, 237.

141 Hart, 2004, 24.

142 Ockenga, Harold J. Can Fundamentalism Win America? *Christian Life and Times*, 1947, 2, 15 in Hart, 2004, 25.

143 McCune, 1999, 109.

Seminary (1947)[144] and Christianity Today (1956).[145] The founding of such institutions gave birth to a new religious identity, one that claimed to be 'truly conservative'[146] whilst being underpinned by modernist/anti-fundamentalist values.

By rebranding itself as an intellectually competent and theologically conservative alternative to Liberalism, Hart contends that [neo]-Evangelicalism soon began to oppose Fundamentalism's rigid conservatism and in so doing, according to Stone, became devoid of definitional clarity and exactness.[147] Hart, for example, argues that Carl Henry defined an evangelical as one who simply avowed belief in the sinfulness of the human condition and the need for redemption and conversion through Christ.[148] As both Protestants and evangelicals affirm such beliefs, nothing appears to distinguish the two camps. Hart continues to assert that by jettisoning the 'cultic' trappings of fundamentalism[149], namely dispensationalism, separatism and literalism, evangelical theology engaged in a race to the bottom,[150] which led to profound existential difficulties in affirming the distinctiveness of its beliefs, its theological mandate, and membership prerequisites.

Tidball disagrees with Hart's contention that Evangelicalism is an artificial construction and regards neo-evangelicalism as a legitimate developmental phase in the movement's attempt to adjust to its post-Enlightenment setting.[151] Whilst it is true that all theological movements, including neo-evangelicalism in the 1940s, are to some extent reactionary, it must also be noted that 18th century Evangelicalism emerges *organically*, out of a mix of revivalism and the re-discovery/application of biblical truth, making its precise moment of inception difficult to identify. Hutchinson identifies Thomas Haweis as one of the first to systematise evangelical theology in his 1757 publication 'Evangelical Principles and Practice.'[152] According to Hutchinson, Haweis affirmed Christ's divinity, the corruptness of man, the salvific atonement of Christ, justification by faith alone, and the importance of sanctification.[153] These doctrines were later elaborated by the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 during a conference which affirmed Scripture's inspiration, authority, sufficiency and the right of private judgement; the triunity of the Godhead; man's corruptness; Christ's atonement; salvation by faith alone; and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.[154]

Thus, according to Hutchinson, there appears to be a great deal of overlap between evangelical theology when broadly defined and historical expressions of Protestant orthodoxy.[155] For example, the creeds and

144 Ibid., 121.

145 Ibid., 143.

146 Hart, 2004, 24-25. Hart (2004, 25) writes that neo-evangelicals such as Ockenga and Henry constructed the notion that "evangelicals, not fundamentalists, were the successors to Augustine and the Protestant Reformers."

147 Stone, 1997, 8.

148 Hart, 2004, 25.

149 Ibid., 26.

150 Ibid., 30.

151 Tidball, 1994, 36-7.

152 Haweis, Thomas. *Evangelical Principles and Practice*. London: Oliver, 1762, iv-v in Hutchinson, 2012, 1

153 Ibid.

154 Evangelical Alliance. Report of the Proceedings of the Conference: Held at Freemasons' Hall, London from August 19th to September 2nd 1846. London: Partridge and Oakey, 1846, in Hutchinson, 2012, 2.

155 Hutchinson, 2012, 11. Noll (2001, 12) observes how "Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and some Episcopalians ... Lutherans, German and Dutch Reformed, and the Restorationist churches (Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ)" shared broadly evangelical beliefs. Elwell (2001, 406-7) notes that evangelicals and orthodox Christians both believe in "the Trinity; Christ's incarnation, virgin birth and bodily resurrection; the reality of miracles and the supernatural realm; the church as the body of Christ; the sacraments ... immortality of the soul; and the final resurrection."

confessions of Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, Augsburg, Westminster, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion[156] are wholly compatible with Evangelicalism's doctrinal tenets. Conversely, Stott's description of evangelicals as Bible and Gospel people[157] nicely complements the Reformation doctrines of *sola Christos*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola scriptura* and universal priesthood.[158] Elwell notes that evangelistic fervour and devotional pietism were even "features of the apostolic church, the fathers, early monasticism, the medieval reform movements ... and the Reformation precursors Wycliffe, Hus and Savonarola."[159] Consequently, according to Hutchinson, Hart's assertion that Evangelicalism did not exist before the mid-20th century is erroneous[160] as the movement's theological origins may be traced back hundreds of years, if not thousands, to the teachings of Christ.

Though Protestant orthodoxy is an essential component in evangelical belief, it does not represent the sum total of evangelical doctrine. Put another way, though classical evangelical beliefs accord with orthodox Protestant doctrines, this does not mean that all orthodox Protestant beliefs are evangelical in nature. Stott encapsulates this when he writes "not all evangelical *essentials* are evangelical *distinctives*."[161] Larsen, Noll and Bebbington contend that evangelicals are theological descendants of the 18th century British-American revival movements marked by religious zeal and pietistic influences – a response to the Reformation's rigid ecclesiology, confessionalism, and dry traditionalism.[162] Elwell traces the origins of these influences to German pietism's commitment to "Bible study, preaching, personal conversion and sanctification, missionary outreach, and social action", Methodism's fiery preaching and evangelistic fervour, and Puritanism's "emphasis on biblical authority, divine sovereignty, human responsibility, and personal piety and discipline."[163] Qualities that were largely overlooked by the established church – such as vigour, compassion, urgency and assurance – therefore distinguish Evangelicalism from Protestantism.[164] As Elwell writes: "Evangelicalism is more than orthodox assent to dogma or a reactionary return to past ways. It is the affirmation of central beliefs of historic Christianity."[165]

Consequently, because evangelical distinctives may be traced back to 18th Century revivalism, classical Evangelicalism cannot be regarded as an artificial construction as its theological antecedents stretch back long before the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. A rediscovery and reapplication of key doctrinal emphases, accompanied by spiritual fervour throughout the centuries, underpinned the great missionary revivals and even the kerygma itself. Such values, though reactionary, emerge and develop organically throughout history. In the case of neo-evangelicalism and post-evangelicalism, both were consciously

156 Collins, 2005, 89.

157 Stott, John R.W., 1977. *What is an Evangelical*? Church Pastoral Aid Society, London in Tidball, 1994, 12.

158 See Yong, 2002, 240.

159 Elwell, 2001, 407.

160 Hutchinson, 2012, 18-19.

161 Stott, John R.W., 1999. *Evangelical Truth: A Personal Plea for Unity, Integrity and Faithfulness*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 11 in Hutchinson, 2012, 11.

162 According to Noll (2000, 238) Protestant churches were not spiritually lacklustre but rather unsuccessful "in freeing themselves from the political restrains of their own establishments," shying away from the task of cross-cultural evangelism. See Larsen, 2007, 5; Noll, 2001, 9; Bebbington, 2004, 42.

163 Elwell, 2001, 407.

164 Ibid., 405.

165 Ibid., 407.

constructed in the mid and late-20th century in response to anti-fundamentalist sentiment and the rise of postmodernism respectively. The fact that they developed as reactionary kickbacks does not necessarily render them artificial constructions as their emergence could be regarded as legitimate developmental phases in Evangelicalism's bid to adjust to an ever-changing epistemological terrain. The issue of construction (organic or artificial) therefore appears to be largely one of semantics.

IS EVANGELICALISM'S ECCLESIOLOGICAL DEFICIENCY A *FATAL* FLAW?

Hart contends that for neo-evangelicalism to grow in popularity with the American public, the movement had to appeal to a broad demographic. However, by ignoring or rejecting doctrinal differences in favour of finding common theological ground, an insipid ecclesiology gained sway.[166] An emphasis on 'church unity' led to accusations that converts at Billy Graham rallies were sometimes sent to liberal or even Roman Catholic churches, allegations that were denied at the time.[167] Nevertheless, McCune insists that Graham's desire for inclusivity,[168] whereby the evangelist insisted on working with a broad gamut of churches,[169] precipitated neo-evangelicalism's final break from the fundamentalists.[170]

Widely regarded as the poster-boy for post-WWII Evangelicalism,[171] Hart argues that Graham evangelised with little ecclesial accountability[172] by capitalising on the growth of the parachurch movement. According to Marsden, the parachurch movement eschewed traditional ecclesial and denominational structures by replacing them with feudalist beacons of loyalty.[173] He attributes the popularity of parachurch organisations to a general indifference towards the institutional church,[174] an erosion of denominational loyalties, and anti-traditionalist fervour.[175] Hart argues that Evangelicalism's infatuation with celebrity culture[176] and 'non-committal' forms of Christianity[177] resulted in a commoditised, individualistic and easy-going faith[178] and he laments the demise of "churchly expressions of Christianity"[179] such as "creeds", "structures of governance", "liturgical resources", regular times of worship, and discipleship.[180] What, however, can be said of Hart's assertion that theological robustness and 'churchly expressions of Christianity' are inextricably linked, even mutually dependent?

Evangelicalism has a long history of experimenting with ecclesiastical and denominational structures. Larsen, for example, observes how despite their differences, Wesley and Whitefield could agree on Evangelicalism's chief doctrinal tenets and were united by a common evangelistic goal, demonstrating a healthy spirit of cooperation that soon came to characterise subsequent generations of

166 Hart, 2004, 117.

167 McCune, 1999, 136.

168 Ibid., 139.

169 Ibid., 142.

170 Ibid.

171 Hart, 2004, 118.

172 Ibid.

173 Marsden, George M., 1991. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 81 in Hart, 2004,120.

174 Ibid.

175 Ibid.

176 Hart, 2004, 120.

177 Ibid., 124.

178 Ibid., 126-7.

179 Ibid.,197.

180 Ibid., 124.

evangelicals.[181] Additionally, Noll observes how Wesley composed hymns for gatherings that were only loosely associated with the established church and was committed to establishing charitable societies and organisations without official church sanction.[182] Wesley and Whitefield also eschewed ecclesiastical norms by preaching in the fields, refusing to confine the gospel message to a religious setting and thereby reaching a more diverse demographic. Though Wesley, Whitefield and other Methodists maintained their Anglican ties, they nonetheless eschewed a rigid ecclesiology (as did the German Pietists and Moravians)[183] by revolutionising cross-cultural evangelism.[184] Great missionary advances were aided by the establishment of numerous churches in the same locality throughout British America, a radical departure from the Reformation's assumption that there should be only one 'unifying' church for each region.[185] Parachurch tendencies may therefore be observed as early as the 18th century and arguably *bolstered* the work of the established church.[186]

Tidball additionally observes that evangelicals distinguish the visible church from the invisible, a trait that dates back to Augustine and the Reformers.[187] He cites Litton who describes the visible church as comprising nominal and unregenerate, as well as true believers.[188] Tidball thus argues that accusations of ecclesiological deficiency have been unfairly levelled against Evangelicalism simply because the movement acknowledges that ultimate (spiritual) reality is not found in visible (earthly) structures.[189] He notes for example that the movement demands evangelicals "find, support and unite with Christians wherever the gospel is preached, the Bible is honoured and the Spirit is moving, regardless of the niceties of church order."[190] Consequently, evangelicals are duty-bound to flee from error and unite in truth (see 1 Corinthians 10:14-22). Rather than representing an ecclesiological deficiency, Tidball affirms that such an outlook is essential if the church is to attain doctrinal faithfulness. It becomes harder for evangelicals to unite over the truth of the gospel when constrained by denominational boundaries. Though Hart is justified in warning against the dangers of unfettered evangelical cooperation with liberal, modernist, and unorthodox groups, he fails to observe how the deep-seated distinction between church visible and invisible is internalised within parachurch and pan-denominational influences and specifically how this outlook can have a purifying effect on church doctrine as well as a deleterious one.

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND ITS PURPOSE

The Greek word for 'church', ἐκκλησία, conveys the idea of the people of God 'assembling' together. This concept is rooted in the Hebrew terms qāhāl, which describes a gathering in response to God's call (Numbers 16:26; Deuteronomy 9:10), and *ēdâ*, which describes a

181 Larsen, 2007, 6.

182 Noll, 2000, 239.

183 Ibid., 238-9.

184 Ibid., 240. The Moravians severed ties with the state church (Ibid., 239).

185 Ibid., 235.

186 Ibid. 238-9.

187 Tidball, 1994,159.

188 Litton, E.A., 1979. 'The Church of Christ, in its Ideal, Attributes and Ministry.' In *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (ed. Peter Toon). Marshall Morgan & Scott, London, 178 in Tidball, 1994, 159.

189 Tidball, 1994, 159.

190 Ibid.

distinct national religious community (Exodus 12:3; Numbers 16:9; 31:12).[191] According to Milne, the early Christians saw themselves as God's people gathered in response to God's call. This image is further substantiated by the fact that ἐκκλησία comprises ἐκ (out of) and καλέω (to call), communicating the idea of a 'called-out assembly'.[192] Of its 114 New Testament uses, 109 times ἐκκλησία describes an assembly that has been 'called out' from the mass of humanity.[193] Though there are 79 singular and 35 plural uses, singular use always refers to the universal church (Ephesians 3:10),[194] making known the wisdom of God. Never is ἐκκλησία used to refer to a church building nor is the word associated with denominational ties.[195] Therefore even a cursory New Testament survey of ἐκκλησία compounds traditional Evangelicalism's distinction between the invisible (universal) and visible (local) church. Evangelical acknowledgement that denominational ties are not immutable therefore provides insufficient grounds alone for denigrating the movement as ecclesiologically deficient.

Hart's accusation is further weakened by a lack of definitional clarity. The movement may only be deemed 'ecclesiologically deficient' if local churches fail to fulfil their biblical mandate. According to Fruchtenbaum, biblical churches should: teach Bible doctrine (Acts 2:42; 11:26; 1 Timothy 3:15-16), exercise the function of priesthood (1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Philippians 4:18); engage in corporate prayer (Acts 2:42; 4:31; 12:5,12; Hebrews 13:15); observe baptism and the Lord's Supper (Acts 2:41-42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29); exercise spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12-14), practise church and spiritual discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 5:20); send out missionaries around the world (Acts 11:22-24; 13:1-4); provide for the needy, especially believers (Acts 6:1-6; 2 Corinthians 8:4-7; 1 Timothy 5:16; James 1:27); make disciples & disciple believers (Matthew 28:18-20); build up the Body (Ephesians 4:11-16); do good in the world, especially to believers (Galatians 6:10); show the love of the Messiah so that the world can see the believer's love for Him (Revelation 2:4-5), and glorify God through ministry (Romans 15:6, 9; Ephesians 3:21; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; 1 Peter 4:11).[196] Only if evangelical churches are failing in their collective duty to carry out these responsibilities can the movement be described as 'ecclesiologically deficient'.

As a reformed Presbyterian, it is unsurprising that Hart writes from a particular ecclesiological perspective. It is problematic, however, to denounce a church as 'ecclesiologically deficient' purely because it identifies with the evangelical label. That aside, Hart is justified in directing his ire at an ecclesiology that resulted in the growth of churches that failed to discharge their duties in accordance with their biblical mandate, attracting worshippers who knew little of the importance and responsibilities of fellowship life. It is ironic therefore, that far from denominational ignorance precipitating the movement's demise, the influence of parachurch

191 Milne, 2009, 284.

192 Fruchtenbaum, A.G., 2005. 'The Universal Church', MBS097, *Ariel Ministries*, 4 [available at: www.arielcontent.org/dcs/pdf/mbs097m.pdf] [accessed 21.2.22].

193 Ibid., 5. The five times ἐκκλησία is not used of the NT Church (used in either classical Greek usage of an assembly or in its LXX use of the congregation of Israel) are: Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39, 41; and Heb. 2:12. Yet even in these references, the idea of a 'called out' people remains, either referencing the wilderness generation or a political meeting (Acts 19:32, 39, 41) (Ibid., 5).

194 Ibid., 6.

195 Ibid., 5.

196 Fruchtenbaum, A.G., 2005. 'The Local Church', MBS106, *Ariel Ministries*, 6-7 [available at: www.arielcontent.org/dcs/pdf/mbs106m.pdf] [accessed 21.2.22].

organisations, ecumenism and special interest groups sustained church membership growth. It is a shame, however, that Hart fails once again to distinguish between traditional/classical evangelical ecclesiology (grounded in pan-denominationalism and a biblical distinction between the universal and invisible church), and neo-evangelical strains (embracing nascent ecumenism); the former having a much closer allegiance to and respect for recognised denominational affiliations. Hart must therefore be wary of equating 'ecclesiological deficiency' with pan and non-denominationalism espoused by classical evangelical theology throughout the ages because Evangelicalism has always embraced a nascent twofold ecclesiology.

CONCLUSION

Whilst it is true that Evangelicalism has always exhibited a degree of theological diversity and cultural sensitivity, never in the movement's history has its membership been so accommodating and its theological voice so muffled. This author partially agrees with Hart's bold claims so far as emergent/post-evangelicalism is concerned but cannot – out of respect for its commitment to core biblical tenets – endorse the contention that neo-evangelicalism was theologically vacuous and indistinct. Despite serious shortcomings, it is possible to heuristically abstract and isolate key theological emphases from 18th century Evangelicalism in the neo-evangelicalism of the mid-20th century. Although neo-evangelicals adopted a more inclusive approach that sought to directly engage culture and modern scholarship, and which arguably precipitated the rise of theological incoherence in future evangelical variants, there remain emphases that distinguish the movement from orthodox Protestantism, such as spiritual fervour, missionary zeal, and a commitment to personal conversion, assurance, and revivalism. Moreover, not all churches were caught up in the neo-evangelical project and would have more readily aligned themselves doctrinally with the classical theology of 18th century Evangelicalism. The same is true of a handful of evangelical churches today.

Though this author agrees with Hart that neo-evangelicalism broke away from Fundamentalism in the mid-20th century, he cannot endorse the scholar's assertion that Evangelicalism, as an epoch spanning theological movement, is a mid-20th century artificial construction as its theological roots may be traced as far back as the Reformation or even the apostolic church. Contentiously, it remains a descendant of classical Evangelicalism despite destructive theological bents. Further, contra Hart's claim that classical Evangelicalism is essentially orthodox Protestantism by another name, this article has shown that distinctive qualities, such as revivalism, distinguish 18th century Evangelicalism from Protestantism.

Evangelicalism has always sought to transcend rigid ecclesiastical boundaries, rooted in a distinction between the invisible and local church. As a reformed Presbyterian, Hart appears to define 'ecclesiological deficiency' solely in terms of denominational allegiance or lack thereof. As such, he runs the risk of unfairly tarnishing evangelical churches that *do* meet the New Testament requirements of a local church simply because they eschew denominational affiliations. It is true, however, that parachurch practice sought to downplay theological differences by engaging in social welfare agendas, jettisoning doctrinal allegiance and fidelity as a result. Though Hart is to be commended for drawing attention to the danger of such unfettered

cooperation with theologically unorthodox and liberal groups, he fails to note the distinction between the visible and invisible church rooted in classical evangelical theology, and that far from emolliating doctrinal purity, a practical outworking of this reality enables Christians to flee from error associated with doctrinal strictures and to unite in truth. Consequently, biblical truth may even be preserved by such an evangelical ecclesiology.

One must be wary of oversimplification as Evangelicalism is a practical school of Christian living and not a polished theological treatise. Like tributaries that branch off from a river course and ultimately have as their source the Reformation, revivals and great spiritual awakenings of yesteryear, Evangelicalism does have a rich theological pedigree that is, lamentably, being jettisoned in a post-modern world. Hart is therefore to be commended for issuing a serious wake-up call to modern evangelicals by providing an exhortation to cherish and return to our rich theological roots. In so doing, we may even rediscover new potency, power, and joy in the proclamation of timeless biblical truth.

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Matthew Wong

Matthew Wong holds an M.A. in Theology from the University of Chester. He is an Associate Tutor in Theology at King's Evangelical Divinity School, UK.