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## Where Is Theology Going?

### Preface

The beginning of this book is very interesting due to the author's own struggle with the very concept he is writing about. Erickson is torn between the need to address the subject and the realization that he can never fully complete the research. He fully admits that some of his conclusions are speculation based upon what he understands currently and what he expects to happen in the future.

The fact that there are so many different possibilities which depend on certain events falling a particular way add to the author's admitted reluctance to even approach this subject.

However, the necessity for this type of research has prompted Erickson to move ahead and produce a very interesting and thought provoking work.

The subjects chosen have no particular pattern and may even have come about by arbitrary choices. The choices of subjects are clearly needed and their discussion is not exhaustive but suggestive and illustrations of the authors arguments.

The push to write this book came as a result of Erickson teaching in several different venues and over a period of time realized the connection and evolution of his teaching. The end result is an interesting and challenging view of the future.

## Chapter 1

### **How Can We tell Where Theology is Going?**

Actually this is not a new subject or even a recent one. The earliest inhabitants of planet earth have always sought to discover the future. Man just seems to have a natural bent in this direction. Perhaps it is the result of fear, not knowing what the future holds leaves the imagination open to speculation. Perhaps it is simply the curiosity of the human mind that drives people to seek the future. Perhaps it is a challenge to discover what God is doing now and will do in the future.

### **Areas Affected by Theology**

The study of theology is very valuable; it affects every part of our lives. What we understand and believe about God directs our actions, thoughts, motives and ultimately our peace of mind. The ultimate result of theology is the role it plays in our relationship to God. Our belief in a specific person, Jesus, and our specific response to Him is a result of theology. With the wrong theology we miss the gift of eternal life and pay eternally for our lack of knowledge about the plan of God. While correct belief is essential for our salvation it is not the only ingredient, acceptance is the other side of the coin. One must believe and receive the gift of eternal life through faith based upon the written word of God. Romans 10:17 says, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

Our theological beliefs impact our relationship to God. When Paul was asked, “What must I do to be saved?” He responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved,” (Acts 16:31). Belief is not enough, it must be a belief in the right object and concept of this one called Jesus. First John clarifies for us the need to be specific regarding Christ, especially in regards to His full humanity and also His deity (4:2; 5:5). It is correct belief coupled with

obedience that is essential to ones relationship to Jesus. This can only be accomplished through correct theological understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus demands.<sup>1</sup> Beliefs impact our relationship to the Lord, but our beliefs also impact our service and ministry as well. Our theology will delineate our understanding of ministry, who does it, how it is accomplished. If we see God as out of touch or out of reach with His creation it will have a direct correlation with my actions. If I see God as actively involved it will have quite a different impact. This whole point gives understanding to how churches develop differently over the years, particularly when the pastor remains in the same church for a long period. The church will take on the beliefs and character of the pastor, who in turn is molded and shaped by his own theology. The pastor's view concerning the doctrine of the church, (which actually defines ministry, who does it, and how it is done), will set the tone and direction for that church. What the pastor believes concerning the eternal security of the believer will clearly show up in his choice of sermons and text, which will differ from what it would be if he believed that one may at any time lose salvation through an act of sin, disbelief, or indifference.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Benefits of Studying the Future of Theology**

One clear benefit of studying the future of theology is the preparation for future changes that may be discovered or seen in the direction theology seems to be moving. The direction of theology will certainly affect future ministry based upon the needs perceived. As we look into the future of theology we can in some ways start preparing for the development of ministry that will be changed.

Staying ahead of change is better than trying to play catch up. Maximizing our efforts without wasted energy or money will pay dividends in the future. Change is often gradual

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<sup>1</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI), p.12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.13.

over a period of time, if we can identify this process it will enable the leaders to start analyzing what is happening and start dealing with the changes as they are occurring. Often ministries are looking at others for direction and new ideas. If the leadership is simply waiting to see what others do, their own ministries will suffer.

The one thing that everyone used to be concerned about was relevance, what is and what isn't. While that term is no longer dominant, the process still is important. People want to know what works, what is new, fresh, and futuristic. Those who are looking ahead will always lead the pack in ideas and excitement. While there are some risks in attempting to be cutting edge on future trends, the risk is much greater than being unprepared for the future.

### **Preparing for Unfavorable Developments**

When we look at the future and anticipate what is just around the corner it will enable us to take advantage of the opportunities that will come. Being prepared is also important in dealing with problems, false teaching, or some type of detrimental development that may spring up. If we had examined the trends perhaps we could have predicted the New Age Movement that swept across the country. The danger here is one of promoting something that may not be wide spread at the time and pushing it into the forefront of society. Any excess response to heresy may actually promote it.

### **Dealing with the Future More Rationally**

The more acquainted we are with a subject the better equipped we will be to deal with it. If we see what is ahead it will enable us to prepare better and deal with it in a more rational way. Things that take us by surprise are often handled in a quick and emotional manner as opposed to a logical studied approach. While emotion is certainly an important part of our lives we need to make sure we are not controlled by it. When we are excited or fearful it is difficult to respond correctly, elevated emotion can impact reason drastically. If we know

that an event is coming we can prepare for it and keep our emotions in check when it actually takes place.

### **Preventing Overreaction**

Changes in the nature of ministry will take place as our theology changes. Anticipating the problems will help keep us from overreacting and moving in the opposite direction so far that we create a new problem from our overreaction. Many heresies in church history have been simply an undue emphasis on one particular aspect of the truth.<sup>3</sup> This was the problem in the first five centuries of the church, mainly during the period from 431 to 451. A more balanced response will be possible if one is able to anticipate problems.

### **Shaping Developments in Theology**

If we can anticipate the future events we are in a better position to help shape the impact of those changes. It seems that God wants us to be pro-active in our ministry. We have been told that whatever we do it should be to the glory of God (I Cor. 10:31). The early apostles were leaders in this area of change. They took what God had given to them and implemented some radical changes. We in turn have been given the responsibility to go into the entire world and preach the gospel (Matt. 28:19). People fall into three groups, those who cause things to happen, those who watch things happen, and those who ask “What happened?”<sup>4</sup> If we are in touch with what God is doing we should be the ones who are causing things to happen in this age.

### **The Complexity of the Theological Environment**

The church functions in a complexity of environments, each being a part of the whole. The best illustration of this is the computer and its hard drive. Within the drive we find large

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.16.

amounts of information, each in its folder, tucked away in the proper file. This allows one to search the information in a rapid fashion, eliminating wasted effort.

Consider the fact that each church functions within a denominational structure or association; developments within that framework will affect the individual church. Step out of the denomination and the church is a part of a larger group, conservative, liberal, etc. This will also impact the individual church as to direction and thinking. Take another step and we will discover the church is affected by the region it is located in, North, South, Europe, or Asia. So what happens on a macro level will be felt on the micro level.

All of this points to the difficulty that arises in attempting to predict movements, changes and trends. Factors far away will impact locally and the further away they are the less likely we will be aware of them. The idea of relativism is not the point; it is simply that there are many things that must be considered if the future is going to be visible early.

### **Theological Prognostication**

There are similar areas that attempt to predict the future trends; one is the weather and the other the stock market. With a wealth of experience and knowledge the weather forecast are often wrong. The weatherman makes his predictions based upon the information available to him at the time of the forecast. When the forecast are incorrect the assumption is the forecast was based upon incomplete information.

The stock market is very similar; people attempt to predict the future trend of stocks and bonds based on the information available to them at the time of the prediction. These predictions are often the result of personal conclusions rather than hard information.

## General Principles

There are four general principles for prognostication that need to be used with the proper methodology. There is no precise step by step procedure, but there are tools available to help make qualified predictions.

1. We should develop a theory of the pattern of theological movement.
2. We need to develop a theory of theological change. What causes a theology to be started? What conditions move and shape it? What can impact institutions and individuals?
3. We need to identify the leading signals that point us to the change.
4. We need a theology of theological change. This can be done with the identification of the activity of God to history, like the doctrine of providence and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, along with the doctrine of last things, eschatology.<sup>5</sup>

### **1. The Pattern of Theological Development**

History has provided an indication that theology has followed a pendulum pattern over the years. What happens is a new trend develops and continues until it reaches a point of extreme enough that there is a backlash. This backlash then moves or pushes theology in the opposite direction of the extreme trend that developed. This can be seen in the events surrounding Martin Luther's break with the Roman Church. Luther was very concerned with the accuracy of the interpretation of Scripture; this produced a push for Protestant scholasticism. Later there was the reaction to Luther's movement which can be seen in the Pietism movement that reintroduced the emphasis on a living experience with Christ, not just correct teaching.

The conclusion we can make is a new movement will tend to continue to grow until a prominent theological leader or group decides the movement has gone too far and so they react in the opposite direction. Each trend will continue until it at some point leads to a

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

reaction in the opposite direction. The problem arises in trying to determine how strong or how long a movement will last until there is some backlash to it. So we look for signs that would indicate a trend has been around for some time, or that it seems to be reaching its extreme. When people start losing their enthusiasm for it the end cannot be far away.

One factor that would contribute to this swing is the different generational experiences. One generation goes through a particular situation and reacts to it, but the next generation does not have the same experience so their reaction is going to be different. Those who went through the Great Depression are very different in their thinking from the baby boomers that followed them.

It is easy to look back and determine patterns, looking forward is a bit harder. However, it seems that the trends have become shorter in their life spans as time go by. Some people may find themselves on both sides of a debate as a result of the short life span of trends that we are now seeing. Looking at a movement that has reached what seems to be an extreme one may resist and oppose it only to later seem to support the very position due to an over reaction in the opposite direction. While trends in the past have experienced life spans that actually transcend one generation to the next, new trends may actually come and go during the same generation.

## **2. Factors Bearing on Theological Changes**

Many issues in society have impacted theology in the past and probably will continue to do so in the future. It would be nice if theology was simply a matter of interpretation of the Word of God, but sadly that is not always the case. The civil rights movement, Marxism, Communism, and feminism have all had an impact on theology. The liberals have been quicker to embrace social issues into their preaching than conservatives, but both have had issues arise due to the social climate.

As travel becomes faster and cheaper people are moving from one continent to another in large numbers bringing with them their own traditions, beliefs and practices. As the immigrants are incorporated in the local bodies their ideas gain weight.

Today the Christian community is facing what has been called a “feedback loop.”<sup>6</sup> This is the problem of practice impacting belief. If everyone is doing it and embracing it then at some point it becomes acceptable theology.

### **3. Leading Indicators of Theological Change**

What people perceive as piety and practice on a regular basis will in fact become acceptable at some point. The Roman Catholics rejected the idea of no birth control until Vatican II. It was just a matter of time before the church rejected on a doctrinal level what the members had rejected in practice.

Protestants can look to their music as an indicator of what is coming. What people sing about will eventually be what they talk about and eventually believe. People will sing what they feel inside and it soon gravitates to what they believe. If they sing it often enough it will become gospel eventually.

Another area to examine is the youth pastors of today, they will give a good indication of where the theology of today is headed. They seem to have a handle on the minds of the young people who will eventually be the leaders of the next church generation.

Professors and teachers who are instructing students in theology are a very good indicator of the possible changes coming. As we look at the position of the professors five years ago compared to what they are teaching now would be one indicator. Pastors and teachers who are retired are another helpful source as we compare where they stand in reference to the ones still actively teaching.

### **4. The Theology of Theological Change**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.23.

There is always the pressure and tendency to move away from God's truth. The world we live in, my own sinful nature all comes to bear on my thinking and conclusions. As a result it is necessary that we pay close attention to the theology that we say we believe as we look at future trends in theology. God in His providence chooses to use people in many different circumstances to accomplish His will. In so doing He will bring us back to faith in him; and revival, including a return to biblical truth over and over.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Methodology of Theological Forecasting**

#### **Content Analysis**

One way to look at future trends is content analysis. This approach looks at articles written over a specific period of time and analyzing the content for patterns of change. By recording the amount of space devoted to a particular subject one may reasonably determine the strength or weakness of that topic. This approach has been used in the world of commerce and can be applied to the world of theology as well. The researcher would simply focus on Christian based writing or missionary publications for an indicator of what is going on in the world at large.

#### **Direct Opinion Survey**

A different approach is the direct opinion survey. Surveys are given to people at random on the street and asked what they think on particular subjects. The Barna organization and the Gallup polls are an example of this approach. Comparing these surveys over a period of time could very well show a trend that is developing or dying.

#### **Generational Analysis**

This approach is similar to the survey approach with the distinction being the age groups targeted for the survey. By isolating specific age groups the results could indicate generational differences that would impact future change. As one generation dies out the mindset of the next generation will move things in a different direction. There is one issue in this approach which is difficult to factor, that is, how much the younger generation will become like the older generation as they mature in age.

### **Expert Insight**

Another approach is the dependence upon expert insight. This method, used by Howard Snyder in *foresight: 10 Major Trends That Will Dramatically Affect the Future of Christians and the Church*, involves surveying experts in the field under consideration and asking their opinions regarding the strength and staying power of certain trends.<sup>7</sup>

### **Leader Conviction Surveys**

Yet another approach is the leader conviction surveys. People who are looked at as leaders in an area are asked, not for their opinions of what will be the results, but for their own convictions on the matters in question. The conclusion is the views of the leaders will eventually be the views of those whom they lead. Teachers and clergy are prime candidates for this approach.

### **Factor Analysis**

This approach looks at the impact a particular event, such as the collapse of communism, will have on the church at large and eventually on the theology of the church. Indirect forces are the prime consideration here. Looking at earlier periods we can see looking back how different events, while indirect, still had an impact on future thinking and action. Certainly it is easier to look back and analysis than it is to look forward.

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<sup>7</sup> Howard A. Snyder with Daniel V. Runyon, *Foresight: 10 Major Trends That Will Dramatically Affect the Future of Christians and the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986).

### **Use of Paradigm Cases**

This approach looks at clearly recognizable events so widely understood that they do not need any documentation. An example of this type of approach is found in David Wells's *No Place for Truth*.<sup>8</sup> He follows the events in the life of a town in Wenham, Massachusetts, the town where he lives. What came out is the time line of events that actually changed America, and perhaps the world in part.

### **Cultural and Religious Trends**

The changes in society can easily be identified as we look back. Some of these changes include military agreements, economic development among nations, population growth, rurbanization, the growth of relativism and demographics. Religious trends would include secularism, divergence over worship, individualism, Christian colleges in crisis, declining membership and support.<sup>9</sup>

### **Societal Changes**

Over the last few years the breakdown of military alliances has had a major impact on society. For more than two generations the world was dominated by two superpowers. The third world nations were constantly being pulled in one direction or another to align with one of the superpowers. Life was dominated by this understanding of the confrontation that existed. For the church, the doctrine of sin apart from the individual was viewed as communism. Good and evil seemed to be confused with capitalism and communism. World outreach was also impacted by the global situation; churches were limited by communist countries in the presentation of the gospel.

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<sup>8</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Erdmann), 1993, pp.17-52.

<sup>9</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI. 1994), p.29.

Today things are very different and doors that were once closed to the gospel are now wide open. Evangelical Christians are now teaching religion in the very department at the State University of Moscow where the required atheism course was once taught.

These events have certainly changed life as we know it. People who were once enemies are now viewed as partners in the world economy. In general this development will support a more conservative view of Christianity.

The movement from a military climate to a more economic centered one will have a strong push on society. The struggle used to be between military powers, trying to position themselves for an advantage over the other. Now we see the struggle between nations in the area of economics, struggling to gain control of vital markets around the world.

As struggling nations develop their economy and resources they present a new and different challenge to the establishment. The young nations will align themselves with nations that will help them grow financially and developmentally. As these emerging nations combine with established economies, their practices, beliefs and methods will have to be considered.

The shifting population will have to be considered as well. As people move from one area to another they will create a shift in political and economic power.

The geographical shifts are not easy to calculate. There is some indication that when people move from the city to the suburbs, they tend to take on the values of the population that they are joining. In the United States there has been a clear move of people from the North to the South and from the East to the West.

One unique feature that has developed over the last century is the sprawl of the city outward; this is called reurbanization by Russell Changler.<sup>10</sup> What happens is the country is swallowed up by the city as it expands outward. As this type of shift continues throughout

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<sup>10</sup> Russell Changler, *Racing Toward 2001: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp.2023.

the country, we can expect that more and more people will take on the thinking patterns, including the theological beliefs, of urban dwellers.<sup>11</sup>

We are moving from an industrial to an information-based society. The explosion of information is rapidly changing our lives. Computers are now taking over jobs once done by people. One result is the decline of the power of unions, less and less people are performing the type of work usually done by union workers. With the rapid increase in knowledge comes the rapid increase in change. Theology ideas are now changing much faster than in the past due to the rapid assimilation of information and new ideas.

With the rapid increase of information has come the decentralization of our society. Control is less concentrated in the central office than before, due to the availability of information to a larger number of people in more places. The personal computer has actually had a major role in this development.

### **The Rising Role of Women**

One clear trend today is the rise of women in society, and their growing impact in positions of leadership. Simply a generation ago women were holding secondary positions. Today they are taking charge of corporations. The education level has proven to be a boost to the power of women in society, as their education level rose so did their power.

A major change in attitude has taken over the business climate allowing acceptance of female leadership on a much larger scale.

### **Emphasis on the Individual**

There is evidence of a shift away from one leader at the top and many workers underneath. An emphasis is on the individual and individual responsibility. America has always been a leader in this area and now the rest of the world seems to be catching up. This trend has weakened and then reappeared suggesting that it may be on the move and a trend to watch.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

## **The Growth of Relativism**

Along with the development of individualism is a growing relativism. Both premodern and the modern periods took the position that if something was true its contradictory position had to be false. This position is losing ground in the present climate; many are willing to accept contradictory statements without sensing conflict. This change of position is strongest among the baby busters (post-baby-boom generation). The baby busters have no problem accepting inconsistency in statements or positions.

Truth is measured by one's personal experience, therefore, what one experiences may be different from what someone else experiences, thus changing their perspective. The level of education and income seem to correlate directly to those holding this position. The question of absolute truth is losing ground among this group, the younger the person questioned the less likely they would accept absolute truth.

## **Demographics**

The movement of people so quickly from one area to another has deeply affected the change of culture in many areas. As we look at the movement of people from Northern United States to the Southern States a trend can be noted. The people moving down have by and large adopted the attitudes of the area they have moved too. Yet, they still have created a push in some areas due to their previous customs and location.

Add to the movement of people we have to consider the number of people in a particular age group. Age is a good indicator of attitudes and actions among most people. The largest section of our country today is made up of senior citizens who went through the Great Depression and World War II. Their experiences included difficulty and sacrifice, yet the younger generation today experiences none of that and it shows in their actions and attitudes toward life and society. The gap between generations is creating confusion on the part of

senior citizens who do not understand the attitude of the young. The young on the other hand have a hard time coping with the seniors for the same reason.

### **Religious Trends**

One trend that is controlling and moving our society today is secularism. The pursuit of material things to the exclusion of the spiritual is a powerful force. The churches are feeling this trend in a real way, forcing them to adopt new methods for coping and managing the change in behavior of many of their people. This growth can be partly attributed to the growth in science and technology.

While secularism is growing there is also a new movement toward religious involvement on a different level. A small but noticeable group of people (including young adults) are seeking a deep and meaningful experience with God. This movement is away from the traditional church, but is still noticeable.

The divergence over worship is both interesting and predictable. Since the old ways of worship seem to have lost their relevance church members started searching for something different to replace old forms. To complicate this situation there is a movement back to the old forms of worship by young people who are not happy with the new approaches. While this movement is small it could have lasting results since these individuals could end up being the leaders of these churches in a short period of time.

### **Individualism**

While America has always been a place of individuals, never have we seen the emphasis as great as it is today. At least in the past people would submit to certain things, like church membership, but today people are so individualistic that they refuse to join anything, even a church. Another noticeable trend is a decline of denominationalism. Previously people

would identify with a particular group for their lifetime. The baby boomers seem to gravitate toward whatever group meets their particular needs at any particular time.

One feature that has developed is the mega church. It may be surprising to some to think of the mega church as a result of the individualism of our present culture. The mega church is really an entity of its own, not affiliated with any particular denomination or fellowship.

This type of church sees itself as having the best means to promote what it deems necessary for its people. This type of ministry seems to ignore what is going on elsewhere and concentrates on its own perspective of ministry. Smaller churches in the vicinity will be impacted by the mega church, often with devastating results. The mega church sees this as simply the survival of the fittest.<sup>12</sup>

### **Christian Colleges in Crisis**

What we would consider the typical Christian College is in for difficult times. The trends will force many to move to a liberal arts education rather than church-related or Christian higher education. There is some question as to the purpose and need for a purely Christian College in today's environment. Over the years the expectation of parents regarding the value of Christian Colleges for their children has been declining. Parents are not seeing the results that they expected from sending their children to a Christian College. The reason lies in the fact that many of the professors do not share the same values of the main stream conservative Christian community. The sense of disappointment and anger is very real over the negative results being produced. A secular education is being looked at with more interest and acceptance. Where teachers in Christian Colleges are reacting against their fundamentalist backgrounds they are frequently less objective and fair than many of their counterparts in secular institutions. Churches seem to be turning to supporting a strong student-ministry

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<sup>12</sup> Millard J. Erickson, "*Where is Theology Going*", (Baker Books, 1992) p. 42.

program on secular campuses. As a result, Christian Colleges will need to turn to a broader range of appeal for their institution for it to survive.

### **Changes in Preparation for the Ministry**

There will be changes in the manner that men prepare for the ministry in the near future. Before the ministry candidate would read theology books with an older pastor, similar to an internship. He would learn what the ministry involved and how to do from those who preceded him. A seminary education would be a part of the training and requirement for acceptance by the fellowship or denomination he wanted to join. This system has always been criticized citing the seminaries as ivory tower institutions with no real life relevance. The mega churches are shouting that they can do a better job of training and equipping young men for ministry.

The mega church is not without problems of its own; these problems will become more evident as time passes. There is no strong theoretical basis for ministry developed by mega churches, but it is found in the seminary experience. Ministers will begin to lose some of the skills needed to run a church outside of their own particular experience. The mega church products will not be able to construct new forms and patterns of ministry when those they have learned become obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

At some point many seminaries will have to close, just like many secular institutions which were unable to adapt to the changing times. Two types of school can survive the ones with a large endowment and the ones that bring large support from other institutions like churches, foundations and individuals for its operation. These schools will be lead by those with an entrepreneurial attitude who can present the case for their institution in a positive light.

### **Declining Financial Support**

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

Another noticeable change is in the amount of support for different types of ministry, including those outside the church. An interesting as well as alarming statistic shows that 80 percent of all the money given to missions comes from people fifty-five years of age and older. Engel and Jerry Jones have stated that their research shows that only 10-15 percent of the baby boomers have a serious interest in sharing the gospel overseas through conventional missions.<sup>14</sup>

The trends are still developing, but there are signs that many large organizations are in financial difficulty. One such ministry reported that its attendance was fourteen thousand, but the giving came from only twenty-six hundred. That figure was fairly consistent from week to week, which shows a serious problem.

Investigation reveals that the older members are feeling left out of the youth oriented church body. While a large emphasis is placed on the young there is not a corresponding emphasis on tithing and giving among this next generation. This new generation seems to look for what they can receive from the church rather than what they can give to it. Unless there is an increased emphasis on the financial needs of ministry many large works will be in serious trouble in the near future.

The leaders from fifty years ago are fading in the popular media; today's leaders will also find it hard to maintain their freshness, relevance, and success. Trends come and go and so do national leaders, identifying these trends will be critical to the health and welfare of any ministry.

### **Chapter 3**

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<sup>14</sup> James F. Engel and Jerry D. Jones, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions* (Orange, Calif.: Management Development Associates, 1989), p. 27.

## The Role of Nontheological Disciplines

The church does not exist in a vacuum; the forces around it contribute to the issues and positions being addressed on any given week. Some of those outside forces are powerful and need to be understood in light of their impact and ability to direct the local church.

Philosophy, psychology and other sciences have a major impact on the church, often because the church is not current with the trends in these studies. The reason lies in the fact that those outside the field are slower to recognize changes and then respond to them. Generally, a given cultural movement reaches theology only after it has become active in the general fields of philosophy, art, music and other areas.<sup>15</sup>

### **A Megatrend: Subjectivism**

Postmodernism represents a paradigm shift in our culture. Theology may be in the position shortly to respond to a counterculture that has become the main culture. Theology has tended to be very slow in responding to changes in society and if not careful this new trend could place theology in the position of being so far behind that it is responding to a culture that no longer is relevant.

The modern and premodern stages had some very clear similarities that are a number of beliefs in common. Both believed that reality had a rational character and that it could be understood by discovering this pattern of rationality. And both believed that there was some structure to history, some force or cause which produced the occurrences which made up history. While there were some serious differences still they had the common ground.

In the modern and postmodern world things were understood in terms of fixed laws of nature. This rational pattern had to be discovered and utilized if what was to happen in creation was to be predicted and controlled. This was the avenue of natural science, as seen in the days of

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<sup>15</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994), p. 54.

Newtonian physics.<sup>16</sup> In both premodernism and modernism, one could arrive at the truth through a rational process in which logical rules applied.

The postmodern period has cast off this approach in favor of creating their own reality.

Instead of there being a pattern of history which thought is to discover, there is this creative role for reason. Postmodernism rejects the idea of a God overseeing the creation and providing guidance and stability to the universe. This is a real challenge to the classic Christian approach to life and God.

The postmodernist reject the idea of objective universals for humans to discover and understand.<sup>17</sup> The postmodernist will explain the universe in terms of their experience as opposed to any fixed reality. The result is pragmatism with the elimination of realism, thus eliminating any theory of truth.

### **Broader Manifestations of Irrationalism**

The movement is away from rational arguments to settle issues or questions relative to life.

In this environment contradictions are not a problem and are accepted as a matter fact. While laws of logic do exist it is not possible to force someone to accept them.

Still, the laws of logic will continue to appear and force themselves on the issues. Even those who reject logic may be forced to assume it, or else suffer serious consequences. For one they will be unable to carry on any meaningful conversation. An interesting point here is the fact that one's assessment of matters is affected by the type of person one is and by one's situation in life.<sup>18</sup> This should be evident sense theology tells us that we are all sinners, and one major fact about sin is a bias towards oneself. This bias shows up in a tendency to be more easily convinced of those positions which have especially advantageous personal results.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

## **Specific Disciplines**

Philosophy is a major player in our society and in the role of impacting theology. This has always been a major avenue for expressing theological thought. The last two hundred years has seen an increase in the analysis of the Bible using the same methods applied to other areas of literature and history. This has produced some interesting studies and opened the door for more exhaustive investigative research into biblical studies. In the past there has been a lack of inductive logic applied to bible research. While there have been many competitive views offered on different topics, there has not been any attempt to evaluate the different competitive views systematically with an acceptable standard.

Philosophy should have an effect on exegesis and thereby indirectly upon theology. By failing to answer pointed questions dealing with the methodology, or lack thereof, by theologians it opens the door for philosophers to address those very same issues, which ultimately can affect theology.

There are some confusing issues attached to exegetical methodology, which can only be cleared up if there is a consensus of agreement among exegetes as to what constitutes the verification of an interpretation.<sup>19</sup> Philosophy can actually contribute to theology by the isolation and identification of the presuppositions in various theologies.

The philosophers will note that it is assumed that there is a common starting point or perspective for all theologies. But if this is the case, why are there such radically different conclusions? Perhaps this is due to the fact that different people are looking at the same subject from a different perspective or assumption. This would certainly create a different conclusion.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

Philosophy could help identify the presuppositions, which are analytical functions that philosophers are quite capable of doing. If we could actually have dialogue rather than argument perhaps some progress could be made between disciplines.

### **Metaphysics**

During the early and middle of the twentieth century, there was a strong resistance to metaphysics in theology. Logical positivism and partly analytical philosophy produced some resistance to metaphysics.

As time went by, process theology developed opening the door to metaphysics. This is an entirely metaphysical theology, and responding to it will require a metaphysical treatment.<sup>20</sup>

Assumptions in this area are not acceptable and in time theologians will develop some limited areas metaphysically; eventually they will also develop larger –scale metaphysical systems.<sup>21</sup>

### **Cultural Anthropology**

Like philosophy, cultural anthropology will make more contributions to theology.

Globalization has taken off in this century, and the emphasis will increase over the next few decades. People have a tendency to read our political views into our understanding of the Bible. Globalization will tend to focus on that realization and have a big impact in the future. Relativism can creep into our thoughts and conclusions. The way we view life and the world is totally dependent upon who and what we are, and that truth is different for different people. Just because we say that there are different ways to see the same things does not make all views correct or even true.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

The danger lies in the application of anthropology as some sort of absolute relativism which denies the existence of objective truth. If we apply cultural anthropology properly it will encourage the discovery of the truth.

### **Psychology**

Psychology will also gain importance and produce a corresponding reaction from theology. Recently psychology has found favor in some churches and produced an interesting dependence, not on the Word of God, but the word of well known psychologists.

The shift has already been noticed in the field of theology. Many seminarians are now preparing themselves with study in psychology and the cognate fields. A noticeable shift can be seen in the movement toward counseling and away from evangelism. Many students are now more interested in becoming counselors than pastors.

The shift toward the psychological has produced a movement toward self and away from concern for other people. The desire is for personal wholeness, which is a concern for self. An examination of the baby boomers will show a movement away from the organized church and a clear movement toward meeting personal needs.

The insights into human nature provided by psychology should be centered on biblical concepts and presuppositions, such as the depravity of man, sin and the place of self-esteem. The present movement still has some distance to go before the counter reaction takes place.<sup>22</sup>

### **Other Behavioral Sciences**

There are other behavioral sciences that have been incorporated into the church, often to the exclusion of the Holy Spirit. Marketing is one such area that has taken on a major role in many churches. Marketing research is used to determine the best location for a new church, the name, the style of building, the sign and parking. This is not to say that the result is wrong, on the contrary perhaps it is well over do.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

In the past the church has relied upon the call to service in determining whether or not to move ahead. Now the church seems to be moving away from a specific call to ministry and embracing a general call. Behavioral studies, personality studies and temperament analysis are being used to determine if someone is suited for ministry.

The same thing is going on in the field of missions. There is a trend toward the social sciences to determine who should go and where they should go. At some point there will rise up some who will insist that God has called them to service regardless of what the studies indicate.

## **Chapter 4**

### **General Trends in Theology**

There has been developing for some time a breakdown of the sense of antithesis between what is viewed as sacred and the secular.<sup>23</sup> Over the years there has always been a contrast between what the Christians saw as important and what the world valued.

#### **The Traditional View**

Early in the history of the church the contrast between the church and the world was very strong. John's gospel depicts this contrast as the difference between light and dark.

Throughout the Scriptures this concept is shown in many different ways. Augustine explained these concepts as two cities, one the city of God and the other from this world.

#### **The Nineteenth-Century Assimilation of Sacred and Secular**

The nineteenth century saw an attempt to eliminate the differences between the secular and the sacred. Hegel was a leader who attempted to blend the two together into what would be called a synthesis, which brought together elements of both positions. There was a breakdown of the idea that specific events sacred to the Christian were not unique at all.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.74.

Everything, historical and otherwise, was absorbed into a great system, blending all these ideas and events.<sup>24</sup>

### **Voices of Protest**

Soren Kierkegaard was a lone voice resisting this assimilation process. He insisted upon an antithesis position for the church. It was Karl Barth who had the greatest impact on this problem. His point was simply that methodology of theology was not to be simply the application of some universal methodology found in many disciplines. Theology must have its own methodology appropriate to its objects of study.<sup>25</sup> Barth separated God from the world in a couple of ways. The extreme transcendence of God means that there is no continuity between him and the human, as liberalism had thought.<sup>26</sup>

### **A New Integration of Sacred and Secular**

Integration can be seen in the fact that the sciences of various categories, have attempted to study theology issues. One example is the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. This movement can be seen in all areas of the theological spectrum, but is less apparent on the liberal side, since they had already begun to assimilate the secular.

One noticeable shift is in the areas of lifestyle and the exclusive path to God through Jesus Christ. Many are embracing the idea that there are many ways to God and traditional Christianity is being abandoned by the emerging church movement. No longer is the idea of sacrifice and service to others the key motivation, now people are looking for what they can get out of church and religion in general.

### **The Coming Reversal**

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Know, 1960), pp. 42-43.

This new trend will probably continue for some time before a backlash is experienced, reversing the trend. This reversal may very well come from some who are presently promoting assimilation on a large scale. The reason for this pattern may not be apparent but it is certainly real. Some people are presently sounding the warning about assimilation and this will likely continue.

### **Anthropocentrism**

Another area that is apparent in this new trend is a shift from a theocentric to an anthropocentric basis of thought. For a long time the Westminster Confession stood as a clear understanding of our relationship to God. Now, we see a shift from a God who existed in his own right and for his own sake to a god who existed for the sake of humans.<sup>27</sup> Several evidences of this truth can be seen in the following:

#### **Humanity as the Measure of Truth**

In the nineteenth century the understanding of truth was shifted to what the human experience could prove. Basically humanity became the judge of what was truth. While there is some credence to this point ultimately though God is the author of all truth and it is simply man's responsibility to discover that truth. The result is an elimination of the supernatural and a dependence upon that which can be seen, tasted and felt.

#### **The Notion of God's Responsibility to Spare Humans from Evil**

One subtle conclusion came in the area of God's responsibility to man. The problem of evil has always created a problem for thinking people as it relates to Christianity. The list of things people expected God to deliver them from increase beyond the essentials to the wish list that continued to grow.

What can be seen today is a decreasing adherence to God with an increasing responsibility for Him to do more for them.

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<sup>27</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Goding?* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1994), p.83.

## **Narcissism**

The present generation of senior citizens is called baby boomers and is often referred to as the “me generation.” Often they display narcissism, a fixation upon self-gratification, showing up as an attitude of “what have you done for me lately.” In the church this can be very difficult to control or even put up with. The church becomes a place for personal gratification rather than service and worship.

## **Lack of Concern for Divine Commands**

Thus saith the Lord has lost much of its power with this present generation. With the happiness of the individual the goal, spiritual disciplines are seen as hindering the path to enjoyment. The character of the law of God as an expression of his personal will is overlooked and sometimes just ignored.<sup>28</sup>

## **A Coming Reaction**

It seems that anthropocentrism will continue to be with us for a while, when it reaches an extreme a backlash will develop. The realization will finally surface that a god who is not at the center of human life is not a god at all, or at least not a god worth serving. The reaction will be a call for commitment, austerity, holiness, rather than self-gratification.

## **Effects of the General Trends in Theology**

The effects of anthropocentrism and loss of the antithesis will have a definite impact on theology. Probably we can expect to see a strong emphasis on the immanence of God. However, some will continue to see God working in institutions that are not Christian and in people who are not necessarily Christian.

The conclusion on this point seems to point in the direction of a change in the type of preaching from a vertical emphasis to a horizontal approach. The next wave of preaching

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

will be more concerned with human needs and comforting human hurts than to glorifying God and declaring his desires and promises to us.<sup>29</sup>

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Doctrine of Scripture**

The future will surely deal with changes in the approach to doctrine of Scripture. While people tend to have a high regard for the Scriptures a decline in the percentage of people who actually believe in the literalism of the Bible. In 1963 a Gallup poll showed 65 percent indicated agreement with the statement “The Bible is the actual Word of God, and is to be taken literally, word for word.” By 1976 that figure had dropped to 38 percent.<sup>30</sup> When looked at from a cultural perspective it was noted that blacks and Hispanics have a higher percentage of acceptance than whites. If the country continues to grow its minority population the percentage of those who accept the conservative view of Scripture will climb. However, the conservative position is in direct proportion to education and income level. As the minorities move up the education and income scale their view of Scripture could change. As the decline in the view of Scripture increases the dependence upon other sciences will increase, such as psychology.

With the denial of belief in the inerrancy of Scripture will come other related issues.

Geology has produced a problem with the dating of the earth. Prior thinking dated the earth as six thousand years old, but with the scientific advances there is now a question as to the Biblical record. This is forcing people to adjust their thinking concerning the doctrine of Scripture. Modern psychology has also produced a dependence upon self-understanding and self-esteem as opposed to accepting what the Scriptures have to say in these areas. Some specific doctrines are so closely related that a change in one changes the other. For example,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

the doctrine of the person of Christ is so intimately linked with the doctrine of salvation that a shift in the former produces a change in the latter.<sup>31</sup>

### **Tensions Relating to the Doctrine of Scripture**

#### **Exegetical Expertise and Lay Bible Study**

An interesting development has been the home bible study movement. People with no formal training are leading and participating in the study groups. Their only authority is often a study bible notes and the consensus of the group.

Another movement is the growth of the science of biblical exegesis and interpretation. The scientific study of the bible has reached very technical levels beyond the scope of most laymen. As the sciences of biblical criticism have grown, exegetes have discovered meanings in the text which often are very different from what the normal person would understand the text to mean.

These two approaches have the potential to produce some tension. If and when the clergy comes to a conclusion different from the laity, the church will face a problem. Trying to predict what will happen between these two approaches could be very helpful.

#### **Objectivity and Subjectivity in Biblical Criticism**

In the past most criticism was based upon objective existent materials, using objective criteria which most people could understand and apply. Recently biblical criticism became more subjective, seeking to discover the oral traditions passed on by the church. Oral tradition in itself is more subjective, sense it is more difficult to identify and to understand than a written source. The problem has always been the conclusion reach by the examiners. When a subjective approach is taken it becomes even harder to reach any common conclusions. As a result structuralism has developed to overcome this subjectivity. Structural exegesis seeks the meaning of the text, not from the author's prospective, but in certain

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

universal human themes. The meaning is objective, but its locus is not the particular text, but the universal character of humanity.<sup>32</sup>

Structuralism seems to be the last attempt to keep an objective approach to Scripture. The present position is called “reader-response criticism,” which is nothing more than postmodernism with a different name. There is a growing movement of criticism against the methodology of biblical criticism. The complaint lies in the conclusions of the modern critic; some believe that the conclusions are not as reliable as claimed.

### **Future Developments in Popular Understanding and Practice**

#### **Selectivity in the Utilization of Scripture**

Once again there is a growing interest in the study of the Bible. This movement is gaining strength and can be seen in a wide range of churches, including the Catholic Church. While the growth of bible study groups is clear, it is also clear that they tend to be selective in their approach to the study of the bible. The interest of the individual involved usually is directed at a personal need, rather than a general overall interest. People tend to overlook the passages that do not interest them or touch them in a personal way.

#### **The Displacement of the Bible with Personal Experience**

In a 1979 Gallup poll young people showed a pointed interest in hearing from God directly as opposed to reading the Scriptures to get a message from God. As a result there will be more interest in receiving revelations rather than in revelation.<sup>33</sup> The movement today is away from intellectualism and towards miracles and modern day manifestations of God. The miracles that are claimed today are more experiential and not observable. Along with the experiential experience comes a shift away from the word of God to personal experiences.

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<sup>32</sup> Carl E. Armerding, “Structuralism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1988), pp. 664-65.

<sup>33</sup> Millard J. Erickson, “*Where is Theology Going*” (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), p. 96.

Another attack on the written word is the so-called word of knowledge. This is a special communication from God. More and more the emphasis is on seeking this special revelation as opposed to reading the written revelation of God's word.

### **Decline in Bible Reading**

Personal experience with continue to be the emphasis for some time. This movement has led to a decline in the interest of history. Looking for a deep personal experience has led some to the abuse of controlled substances. Even the rise of video games has impacted the reading of the Bible. People are glued to the computer for hours with no real benefit, simply a way of spending time. The desire seems to be for entertainment rather than knowledge.

The conclusion seems to point to a continued decline in Bible reading resulting in a decline in authority for the Bible in areas of faith and practice.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Increasing Influence of Third World Christianity**

For centuries Christianity has been controlled and dominated by Europeans. Now the third world countries are beginning to have some push and influence that did not exist before this generation. The third world shows a strong trend toward group consciousness, as contrasted with the considerable individualism of the West. This fact would led to a more objective approach for what is true for all in the group, contrasted with subjectivism, seeking what is true for oneself. This ascent of the Third World should produce an increase trust in the authority of Scripture.

### **Tension with the Secular World**

As we watch the secularization of the West we can anticipate an impact on religious thinking. Our predecessors generally looked at life from a spiritual or biblical perspective. The result is a clear void on matters of faith and Scripture with the new generation. What was common with the old folks is foreign to the younger.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

Even among Christian publications we see a movement away from Scripture and toward experiences and events. What to write on and how to deal with issues of today is a constant struggle. The movement seems to be separating theology from psychology, putting each in a private box which do not overlap or touch. The Christian is struggling to figure out how he can live in two separate worlds at the same time. More and more there is a tendency for Christians to adopt the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of the world. Even spiritual beliefs and theological doctrines are being formed, often by secular sources, whether consciously or unconsciously.

### **The Rise of Competitors to the Bible**

The competition for authority has risen over the decreasing view of Scripture. It would seem that the refusal to consider super natural causes for the writing of Scripture has created a low opinion of the text we have in our hands today. Since the Bible is seen by many to be flawed and not inerrant other sources of authority are considered; science, philosophy, and psychology are among the main options.

### **Unfinished Agenda**

#### **The Problem of Secondary Naturalism**

In the past some men, primarily Rudolf Bultmann, approached the Bible with a naturalistic mindset. What he presented was the concept that was called a “closed continuum,” which meant that the events described within the Bible must be seen and understood in light of natural or scientific law.<sup>35</sup> The immediate result was the rejection of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as a literal event. What he declared was all miracles had to be rejected or reinterpreted based upon natural laws.

Conservative Christians have constantly defended the miracles recorded in the Bible. The interesting point here is the fact the many Christians will accept most of the miracles of the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.104.

Bible but reject the idea of any supernatural occurrence in the writing of the Scriptures. The naturalistic approach has impacted the conservative camp and must be identified as such.

If not checked this secondary naturalism will eventually touch and change our belief in any supernatural miracles recorded in the Scriptures.

### **Biblical Authority and Contemporization**

In our desire to make the message clear to this present generation we have altered, changed, removed or rejected many established positions, thus in effect have rewritten the written word.

While there is also the danger of being so archaic in our thinking that we fail to get the true message across, we need to be very aware of both extremes. Our understanding needs to be what is true in the Bible as taught in the original context, but given in a manner that is relative and understandable today.

### **Contextualization of the Timeless Message**

We need to learn how to apply the message of Scripture in a world that is devoid of understanding of Biblical principles. The church must be able to see how the Scriptures relate and are relevant for today, if they are going to have enough confidence to obey them. Trying to make the Scriptures fit the times is creating some confusion; rather we need to see how the Scriptures will prepare us to deal with the times.

### **Biblical Authority and Pragmatism in the Ministry**

Increasingly there is a growing pragmatism among those already in ministry. The defining of the message by the results it generates could have long term consequences. Right now there does not seem to be many changes in doctrine simply a narrowing of the doctrines to what has immediate results. The feel good message, the lack of emphasis on hell and punishment are specific areas resulting from this type of pragmatism.

Missions have tended to move toward a greater emphasis on the behavioral sciences instead of biblical and theological materials, and this is strong among evangelicals. The emphasis on what the Bible actually teaches continues to be at the heart of the battle, it is both important and difficult.<sup>36</sup>

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Doctrine of God**

The amazing statistic that continues to impress statisticians is the number of people who continue to believe in the existence of God or a universal spirit. From 1944 to 1986 that number has remained between 94 and 97 percent. When these two groups were asked the same question but with a more specific understanding of God as a personal, holy and perfect creator the figure dropped to 82 percent among senior citizens and 69 percent among baby boomer.<sup>37</sup>

The responses can be grouped by ages into a predictable pattern. The pre-boomers (46-64) and seniors (65+) respond with similar views, as do the baby boomers and baby busters. One statistic that is surprising shows that 7 percent of those who call themselves “born-again” believers held to non-orthodox views of God, 5 percent believed that God is the full realization of human potential, and 2 percent described God as a state of higher consciousness that one can reach. The pollster (Barna) goes on to say that he hopes these people simply misunderstood the question that was asked.

### **Factors Weakening the Doctrine of God**

#### **The Crisis in Metaphysics and the Doctrine of God**

The crisis of belief has not come from the study of theology, but from the difficulties produced from philosophy, and from a supposed crisis in metaphysics. The metaphysics

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

problem is simply doubt in regards to knowing anything about the nature of ultimate reality, the very information that metaphysics should provide.<sup>38</sup>

Karl Barth was very opposed to any kind of natural theology, any attempt to discover God from the creation or any other method apart from the revelation of Jesus Christ. His point was any god discovered by human means had to amount to an idol and not the God of the bible. However, he would point out that we still cannot fully know God.

Process theology is a very different approach that agrees with traditional theology that a metaphysical knowledge is required in theology, but believe a new approach is necessary. Since the world has changed drastically in the last century new approaches are needed to comprehend what is taking place now. William James clarifies this position in his book, *“Pragmatism.”* James states, *“The fundamental unit of reality is not substance, but event. Further, reality is organic, so that all of it is interrelated with everything else, and what is true of one segment of it is therefore also true of the entirety. Any change, development, or growth within the whole of reality is true of God as well.”*<sup>39</sup>

So while process theology is thoroughly metaphysical, it is a metaphysic of process and event rather than fixed reality and substance.<sup>40</sup>

This seems to point to a diminution of the personal quality of God by joining everything together in one reality. It appears this position fails to take into account that God is above His creation, is not like man, is not bound by our limitations and is therefore not forced to change when our world does. This weakening of the position of God will continue for some time. The development of science will also move in the same direction, creating less trust and dependence upon God.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.114.

<sup>39</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian, 1955), pp.41-86.

<sup>40</sup> Norman Pittenger, “Process Thought as Conceptuality for Reinterpreting Christian Faith,” *Encounter* 44.2 (Spring 1983): 111.

## **Feminism**

Another consideration in the weakening of God is the development of feminism; some of the immediate results seem to be the depersonalizing of the concept of God by changing some of the impressions or titles for God. Instead of God the Father, we now are told it is the father-mother god or our heavenly parents.

## **Popular Christian Music**

The modern music has limited or narrowed the conception of God. We are told He is powerful and can do anything, but we see a diminishing of the holiness, righteousness, and his will for his creation. The subject of judgment or God's nature is rarely heard in our songs. The need for cleansing and forgiveness fails to make the list of important items. Rudolf Otto says the most damaging omission is the awe of God and His greatness.<sup>41</sup>

## **Technology in the Practice of Ministry**

In recent years evangelicals have been in the forefront of technology using popular media, such as radio and television. The main line denominations have been slow to respond or copy this trend. The result is more dependence on technology than on old fashioned prayer. God can now be predictable in the results being sought, which raises a serious issue of who is in charge?

## **Factors Leading to a Strengthened Doctrine of God**

### **Charismatic Christianity**

The Charismatic movement has produced a new dependence on divine immanence. They are showing a renewal of belief in God's willingness and ability to perform miracles today. This movement can be seen among Catholics and Protestants alike. This approach sees God as totally transcendent in everything. Instead of looking to natural processes the Charismatic will look for God to work in ways that go beyond nature and natural laws.

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<sup>41</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp.12-40.

### **Decline of Confidence in Technology**

Another movement that should lead to a strengthening of the doctrine of God is the ongoing erosion of people's belief in the efficacy of natural processes and technology for the answer to all of their problems. The amount of unsolved problems of a major sort creates a sense of overwhelming anxiety leading to despair. Despite political and social progress, the world is still in a mess and getting worse. New problems such as AIDS threaten to become worldwide epidemics with no cure in sight. Natural disasters continue to plague the world with no human ability to stop or control them. The progress science has made is impressive, but it falls far short of answering all of life's problems, particularly the critical ones.

### **Disillusionment with Eastern Religions**

There is a growing disappointment with Eastern religions and their philosophy. In the beginning a sense of novelty and intrigue surround the Eastern religions, but evidently that will wear off and they will fade back to where they came from. The result should be a reaction against anything that confuses the natural with the super-natural, the divine and the human.<sup>42</sup>

### **Strengthened Philosophical Resources**

The past presentation of the transcendent view of God has been weak. The argument has not been made with clarity or persuasion, but the future should see a rise in arguments and evidence to refocus on this subject in a more critical manner. It is not uncommon to find Christians in the philosophy department of a major university; in many cases a Christian serves as the chairperson. The Society of Christian Philosophers is probably the best indication of this new trend.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 121.

The result of the increase in the number of Christians active in philosophy will produce a better defense of the traditional issues of theology.

### **Increased Acceptance of the Doctrine of the Trinity**

More attention is being given to the doctrine of the Trinity and as such we will see more acceptance of the doctrine. Another point that strengthens the doctrine of the Trinity is the belief in Jesus Christ. This has always been a stumbling block for some, in regards to the Trinity. This reflects the changes we have seen in the criticism of the Gospels, producing a stronger belief in the historical Jesus.

### **Remaining Issues for the Doctrine of God**

#### **Einstein Physics and Divine Transcendence**

Still unresolved is the debate between the Einstein and the Newtonian understanding of the universe. The Newtonian view was a sort of absoluteness and finality, while Einstein saw things in view of physics alone.

Einstein's view gives us the means for rethinking the doctrine of divine transcendence. As we pursue such subjects it will provide a better orthodox understanding of God.

#### **The Problem of Evil**

The problem of evil remains a major issue in theology and needs to be addressed differently than in the past. This problem is a constant issue that must be addressed and probably will continue to be an issue for a long time. There is a growing recognition that while God is transcendent and immutable, he is also an active and involved being who actually takes part in His creation and feels and suffers hurt along with his people.

#### **The Rise of Experiential Religion**

For many people religion has been a spectator activity, with the clergy leading and the worshipers simply watching. In the Roman Catholic Church there has been a major shift in the way people worship. Now worshipers are participating in ways never seen by their parents and grandparents, prayers are personal, messages are understood and God has taken on a new face for many people. These changes must have an impact on theological understanding.

### **The Decline of Authoritarianism**

Overall the church is seeing a more democratic approach by its members. The absolute authority of the clergy seems to be weakening and even challenged in many sectors of the Christian world. As a result there may be a trend in minimizing the idea of absoluteness and sovereignty of God.<sup>43</sup> The idea of God being Patriarchal would be offensive to some and reflect in their acceptance of God's person. This can be seen in the way many are neutering God and making him unisex.

### **The Need for Careful Definition**

The definition of God has become cloudy and needs to be clearly defined when speaking of Him. One view of God may differ drastically from another view; due to the changes in our society.

### **An Unresolved Tension**

The behavioral sciences have created their own impression upon the philosophies and upon theology in particular. Telemarketing is prime example of the changes being incorporated in areas of ministry like church planting. With telemarketing the results are very predictable,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

but raise the question of God's involvement in the whole process. If it is so predictable are we actually dependant upon God for the results? Less prayer and more methods seem to be the direction some are taking. This conflict will at some point have to be resolved by the church.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Doctrine of Humanity**

The doctrine of humanity is a prominent subject in Christian theology and in popular thinking. This is a subject that everyone knows something about. As a human being all of us have a particular interest in humanity. This area of study has only come into style recently and along with the behavioral sciences has created some interesting arguments.

#### **The Classical Conception of Human Nature**

Plato and Aristotle sought to determine the true essence of man. Both of these men believed that everything has an essence, a pattern of characteristics which determines what it ultimately will be. In attempting to determine what makes a human a human, the characteristics of the individual would be examined, such as rationality.

The Christian would see man in view of the biblical record which declares that man is made in the image and likeness of God. However, what that likeness and image actually looked like could be described differently from one theologian to another. But, there was a link between man and the rest of creation that was understood. Man's relation to God was also critical in the Christian view of humanity. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility often created a dilemma, but most acknowledged the necessity of both.

#### **Factors Changing the Understanding of Humanity**

##### **The Theory of Evolution**

The last two centuries has seen the rise of several factors that have affected Christian doctrine. The theory of evolution has been a strong factor as one tries to deal with the question of the origin of the species. Evolution has been promoted as an alternative to special creation. The result is an attack on the inspiration of Scripture, particularly as it applies to the creation account in Genesis.

### **Existentialism**

A second recent development (relatively speaking) is the rise of existentialism. This teaches the emphasis on individualism and the human will. This approach offers a strong personal responsibility for ones own situation. The existentialist will declare that circumstances do not make us what we are. The future is in the hands of the individual to will and to accomplish whatever he chooses to be.<sup>44</sup>

### **Deterministic Views**

Existentialism probably developed as a reaction against the different social sciences and social theories which consider humans and their reactions to be shaped by outside forces. Determinism sees the human situation controlled by its contact with natural forces. Some of these factors include geographical or racial. What happens is the human will is diminished and even the work of God in the individuals life.

### **Decline of Theocentrism**

The impact of God has declined to the point where He is no longer the controlling concept in the understanding of human nature. People are looking to earthly factors to define themselves, de-emphasizing responsibility to God. The practical view of this approach is to take the boy out of the ghetto, place him in a different environment and he will change. Someone is poor, give him some money, job or skill and he will be better. Concentrating on these factors could easily impact how one views God and the need for salvation.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

### **Relational Theology**

The emphasis is placed on relationships as the primary way of living out your faith. The emphasis has been placed on the second command to love ones neighbor as yourself. This takes away from the responsibility to love God with all your heart mind and soul. The source of behavior is wrapped up in how we treat others, not the Ten Commandments.

### **Popular Psychology**

With the increased interest in psychology has come a decrease in the interest in the Scriptures. More and more see psychology as the source for all our problems, not the written word of God. The standards are being set by the doctors with no respect or regard for the Biblical mandates.

### **Increased interest in the Individual**

The individual has now become the center of all activity. This has brought about an emphasis on the study of man, relegating God to the shelf. For many people the idea of a sovereign God who decides who lives and who does not, who is saved and who is lost, does not sit well. An interesting outgrowth has been the idea that God is actually responsible to His creation to provide their needs and their wants. If a person is not happy with life, he generally will blame God for not making him better.

### **Nontheistic View of the Purpose of Human Existence**

Today there is very little consideration given to what God says is needful in life. The gospel of wealth, health and happiness is still a major factor for many people today. They think that all they have to do is name it and they can claim it. God then is obligated to give them what they want if they simply show enough faith.

An interesting study showed that if religion and the Bible are removed from the mix of factors, born again Christians and non-Christians have identical value patterns.<sup>45</sup> This shows that the church is being influenced more than we would like to believe by outside forces.

### **Legacy of the Evolution Debate**

While the debate over evolution has left some clear consequences the real issue at the heart of the debate is the origin of man. Right behind that question is the debate over the special nature of man, is he endowed with something distinctively spiritual. These two issues will continue to be debated and will drive many positions in the near future.

### **The Rise of the Behavioral Sciences**

The social sciences will continue to impact the understanding of human nature. It has only been in recent years that Christians have paid any serious attention to these disciplines.

Pastoral counseling has just started to take on importance in local churches and seminaries.

As families find themselves in more serious situations, counseling will be the direction many will seek.

### **Bioethical Issues**

Some theological discussion will be produced on the doctrine of humanity based upon ethical issues being forced upon us by society. Planned Parenthood has convinced many that a fetus is not a child and therefore abortion is acceptable. Another issue that will be hotly contested is euthanasia. What is at stake is the definition of human life. Many political debates are founded on the definition of humanity.

### **Future Directions**

The obvious question must be where is the doctrine of humanity headed? Some are leaning in the direction of the Greek philosophers that taught a dualism, yet the Old Testament gives no support to this position. Like anything it is possible to go to an extreme and become

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

excessive dealing with the unity of human nature. This extreme position will produce some difficulties for some other doctrines, like the doctrine of the intermediate state.<sup>46</sup> The intermediate state looks at the position of one in between death and resurrection. This suggests that a person must be able to exist at some stage apart from their human body. The biblical debate over the concept of humanity will continue and probably some new views will develop out of these debates.

### **Growing Egocentricity**

With the acknowledged trends already in place it seems reasonable to conclude that egocentrism will continue to grow. This can be seen as a result of a strong movement upon freedom and autonomy rather than submission of oneself to an external authority and especially to God.

### **Decline of the Work Ethic**

Work is declining as an avenue to please and glorify God. Calvinist and the Puritans understood work as a means to serve God and fulfill their purpose on earth. Hard work used to be looked at as part of one's calling and not as a curse.

The present attitude in the United States is directed at less work, more leisure. The trend seems to be in the direction of dismissing work and serving God to one of simply enjoying God.

### **Short-Term Missions**

Decline in the value of work is showing up in many areas such as missions. The new trend is for short-term rather than career missionaries. At the present time nearly half of North

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 141.

American missionaries are short-term. David Hesselgrave says that there is a consensus among missions that the benefits of short-term service are greater for the missionary than for the nationals.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Charismatic Emphasis on Personal Benefits**

The “signs and wonders” movement and partly the charismatic movement in general have produced some trends. This movement places a large emphasis on physical healing as a primary benefit of the Christian life. There is a big push declaring the benefits the believer receives from God. Noticeable was the fact that this group scored lower than other groups in the area of commitment and service. The movement is growing and if it gains more speed there will be a shift away from the authority of the Bible toward a direct leading of the Holy Spirit. It seems that the Holy Spirit’s direct correspondence concerning responsibilities may not be as specific or extensive as the Bible’s.

### **Emphasis on Self-Determination**

Self-determination has taken on new meaning and emphasis. This approach is one of the main positions of the New Age Movement and is also found in existentialism. This emphasis would push people to embrace a more Arminian view than a strong Calvinistic view of theology.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Doctrine of Sin**

#### **Indication of a Changed Situation**

#### **Popular Moral Reposturing**

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<sup>47</sup> David J. Hesselgrave, *Today’s Choices for Tomorrow’s Mission: An Evangelical Perspective on trends and Issues in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp.37-38.

Evangelicals are now embracing practices that their parents would never have considered. Drinking, smoking and movies head the list of acceptable practices for this present evangelical generation. Some matters continue to hold the line, such as extramarital sex, premarital sex and homosexuality.

Within the general population there remains a constant belief in sin. And surprisingly most considered that they had kept the Ten Commandments in part and some thought they had completely followed them. The key to this twist is the fact that people have redefined sin. The concluding thought by many is that man is basically good. Or put another way, people may sin, but they really are not sinners or depraved.

### **Changes in Preaching and Evangelism**

The change in the general attitude toward sin has partly been due to a change in the style and manner of preaching and evangelism. Currently the messages coming from the theologians are tempered, softer, non-judgmental, producing a lack of guilt and condemnation. Rather than sin being labeled as wrong, it is portrayed as not wise, not beneficial, something to avoid.

### **Relative Silence Regarding Sin**

Sin is not a popular subject and is being neglected more and more. Looking at the articles and books that are being published today we see more self-help than self-examination. Self-esteem is what people want to hear and it is what they buy. The people have itching ears and have gathered to themselves teachers who are giving them what they want, not what they need.

### **Contemporary Christian Music**

Today's music has a clear absence of the topic of sin. This is surprising since the Psalms are a major source for the new music with the exception of the fifty-first psalm, as well as all the

Psalms that speak of the wrath of God. The sense of awe, sin, unworthiness and guilt is absent from today's positive type of praise music.

### **Epistemological Pelagianism**

The development of "epistemological Pelagianism" has produced some interesting debates. The great debate between Augustine and Pelagius over the moral and spiritual condition of human beings, and the effect of the fall upon human nature continues today.

Augustine held to what we call the total depravity of man, while Pelagius saw that man had some good in him. Augustine would argue that humans in their natural state are unable to do any genuinely good works which would win God's favor and create some positive standing before God. Also the understanding of the Bible was beyond the unsaved and only truly born-again believers could understand the word of God. The struggle is over the ability of the unsaved to understand scripture and to exegete the text. The argument is over the ability of the unsaved to understand the text or not. Some would say that the unsaved can understand the text they simply have trouble accepting it.

The struggle seems to be moving to a point where the trained pastor will be competing with the untrained lay groups who gather together to share what they think the text says. This could be labeled the intellectual and the spiritual approaches to biblical interpretation. For some sin and depravity have no impact on ones' ability to comprehend the text. The conclusions do not decrease the degree of depravity, but its extent: certain facets of human personality are affected, but not others.<sup>48</sup>

### **Factors Influencing the Future of the Doctrine**

The immediate movement is toward a weaker understanding of the doctrine of sin. If we continue to sing songs void of sin and guilt we will become less receptive to messages on the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.156.

subject from the pulpit. In the past the pastor was the only voice the laity heard, now they are constantly exposed to preaching from many different sources.

### **The Grace Controversy**

The “pure grace theology” is another topic that will influence theology in the immediate future. This discussion centers around the question, “does one have to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, or whether belief in him simply as Savior is enough.” This question raises the possibility that one would have to accept certain practices, if their salvation will be acceptable to God. To the theologians in the pure grace school this would be nothing short of legalism. The next question that comes up is in the area of repentance, does one actually have to repent to be saved? Can salvation be granted simply on the basis of belief alone? If people are not required to repent, perhaps they are not very sinful to begin with. If people are accepting Jesus just to get their needs met, perhaps it will be difficult to expect much commitment from them later.

Even the battle between Calvinism and Arminianism did not diminish the reality of sin and the need to deal with it. Both camps have required repentance from sin.

### **Exposure to Situations of Extremity**

The movement back to a more radical view of sin should be the result of the present movement. North America has been relatively free from the hardship faced in many third world nations. In an atmosphere of peace and safety it is easy to find the goodness in people, but the events around the world will have an impact as immigrants come to our shores bringing with them the hardships they encountered. When we start to experience hardships, or to be influenced by people who lived with it, we may take a different look at the sinfulness of man. When theology is written by persons from poorer countries, the place of sin in theology will increase.

## **Globalization and Diversification of Theology**

African cultures and people from behind the iron curtain have a very different perspective on the sinfulness of man. Now that they are free to move around they will surely have something to say about sin and the nature of sin in the world. For many years our theology was being written by professors in ivory towers, who were insulated and protected from most of the events of the world.

## **Emphasis on the Individual: Freedom and Responsibility**

Two important terms in use today would seem to cancel out one another. The first is freedom and the second is responsibility. On the one hand there are those who want absolute freedom to do whatever they want to do, while the second group emphasizes the responsibility of the individual. What we find is a general belief in the necessity of responsibility that is growing among evangelicals. Even some politicians are beginning to speak of the need for people to get away from the victim mentality and move toward personal responsibility for ones life.

The liberal welfare states of the twentieth century are beginning to move in a different direction. Welfare recipients are now being required to work for their support whenever possible. The socialistic societies of Eastern Europe are changing. As this trend continues we may see a movement back toward a belief in human sinfulness. When people are held accountable for their actions, the concept of sin again becomes meaningful.

## **The Failure of Optimism in Human Ability**

The old time liberal theology saw man as basically good, but that seems to be changing. One reason for the change in the direction is the Christians inability to distinguish between good and evil, the secular from the divine.<sup>49</sup> The events of the century, starting with World War I

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.161.

and continuing put a damper on the goodness idea. The great depression, World War II, Korea, Viet Nam put the nail in the coffin.

Even though we have seen a movement back to goodness of man, the same factors that crushed that theme a century ago should do the same once again. The increased violent crime in the United States will move debate toward the sin issue and the depravity of man. Even hell has regained some interest among secular university campuses.

### **The Pragmatic Effects of Positive Preaching**

The flood of preaching on the positive thinking is a supplement to, not a substitute for, conversion and regeneration. Often the positive message is all that is preached and eventually this will produce a dependence of my attitude rather than the regeneration and forgiveness from God. At some point sin will have to be addressed and preached. Looking for success with people, some have failed to seek success with God. Surprisingly the liberal camp seems to be moving toward a more biblical approach to sin than the present evangelicals.

## **Chapter 9**

### **The Doctrine of Christ**

#### **Social Developments Affecting the Doctrine of Christ**

##### **Globalization**

The world is shrinking and the effects are becoming more noticeable. Now people from all around the globe are able to discuss and debate their positions on theology. Before the Western Europe and North American positions dominated discussions, but now they are just two among many. We can see that people from other parts of the globe are very sincere in their beliefs and practices. They are very capable of explaining and sharing what their faith means to them, thus impacting the thinking of the European and American scholars.

What is coming out of this mingling of people is a different understanding of the unique incarnation of God. Some see the Western view of God as simply one way of understanding Him, that there are other possibilities. This impact is just beginning and will continue for some time. The trend is forming into what we call “universalism,” where Jesus becomes many things to many people. Is Jesus really unique or have we simply confined his characteristics to fit our world? Many will argue for the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as they should. If we continue to blend him into the cloudy arena of the other world religions, He will lose His position as Lord of Lords and King of kings.

The resurrection is something that sets Jesus apart from everyone else, and makes Him unique. This truth will come under attack and the need to prove the resurrection will grow in importance for many.

### **Current Music**

One change that stands out is the movement to emphasis Jesus rather than Christ. Jesus speaks of his humanity, while Christ speaks of his deity. Jesus appears very often in songs that deal with his humanity. This would support a movement toward the idea of Jesus being human, a very special human, but not fully God.

### **The Political Objections**

Worldwide we see a comparison between Jesus and other religious leaders. One issue is the idea that Jesus is simply the concept of Western thought and not really a world wide force. Many see Jesus as the idea of white Western-minded middle-class men. However, the more radical forms of feminist and black theology see Jesus very differently.

An attempt will be made to show Jesus with a more universal appeal than previously seen. Certain features of Jesus will be highlighted while others ignored, depending on the picture

one seeks to portray. Jesus is indeed a universal figure that can have universal appeal to the masses.

## **Internal Theological Developments**

### **Affecting the Doctrine of Christ**

#### **The Accent on the Work of Christ**

A tendency study of Christ based upon His work has been in place for some time. Emil Brunner stated this, “We must first examine what Jesus did if we would know who he was.”<sup>50</sup> Today Jesus is often depicted as the friend who meets our needs. Many people respond to this aspect of Jesus and find it easy to accept. The personal experience with Jesus is at the top of most lists today. There are some indications that our society has reached a peak with this approach and a reversal may be coming soon. The antirational approach has some serious flaws and short comings. Developing now is the idea that the way one understands Jesus is not only tied into His work, but the work has to be seen in light of who Jesus really is. What Jesus did is certainly connected to what he could do, and what he could do is to a large part a function of what he was and is.<sup>51</sup>

#### **The Status of Biblical Studies**

Postmodernism is a continuing factor in the development of theology. As modernism gave way to postmodernism certain assumptions, conceptions, and methodology changed. A shift toward subjectivism began to apply to the doctrine of Christ. The emphasis changed from the specifics of Jesus ministry and life to what He could do for me. More and more Jesus will simply become a figure, a symbol of some religious ideas and practices. There will be less emphasis on the factual teaching of the gospels and more response to how one feels.

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<sup>50</sup> H. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), pp.271-74.

<sup>51</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where is Theology Going?* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI., 1994) p. 174.

Obviously this will produce a very unstable religious experience in the life of those who approach theology in this manner.

On the other side are those who indeed are seeking the factual truth of the scriptures.

Seeking to know Jesus better, to understand the scriptures and apply them in a consistent daily walk is the goal for some. This movement, which stresses the fact that we can know Jesus, has resulted in a stronger belief in his deity. As one studies the factual experiences of Jesus it becomes clear that only some supernatural power could do what he did.

### **The Third Wave**

This movement has been known for some time as the “Charismatic Movement.” Changes have taken place within this movement to what have become “the Vineyard,” the “signs and wonders” movement, “power evangelism,” and the “third wave.” The previous emphasis was on speaking in tongues, the new movement stresses healing and the “word of knowledge.” With the strong emphasis on miracles, it would be logical to think that a strong emphasis on the deity of Christ would follow, but that is not the case. The result has been an increase on the emphasis of Jesus as a man, his humanity gets prime attention. Because of the humanity of Jesus the conclusion is we can do what He did. The desire and belief is that God will work through us just as He did through Christ. This movement is still rising and there is no indication how strong it will become.

### **The Understanding of the Atonement**

Comparing the work of Christ and the person of Christ will continue to be debated. It is clear that these two subjects are critical in the debate over the atonement of Christ. What Christ did and who he is are tied together. Our understanding of Christ cannot conflict with our understanding of the atonement. If we believe that Jesus was just an example for us, then we will see him as a man. But, if we understand that He died in our place for our sins, we must

see Him as God. Believing that we are debtors to a holy and righteous God, the payment had to be perfect without blemish and come from a sinless human, Jesus.

The historical facts indicate that Jesus shed his blood and died, and the theological interpretation states that his blood cleanses us from sin.

### **Some Waves of the Future**

#### **Popular Music**

Perhaps the reversal in popular Christian music is already underway. If we compare the words from some popular Christian songs written before 1983 with those written after that period we see a shift taking place.<sup>52</sup> Prior to 1983, thirteen percent of the songs referred to Jesus' deity and sixteen percent to his humanity. After that period we find that seventeen percent now refer to the deity of Jesus and only six percent to His humanity.

#### **The Universalizing of Jesus**

The social universalizing of Jesus seems to be taking hold. Due to a number of theologies being written from other perspectives we see a change taking hold. No longer are the characteristics of God attributed to the masculine. Women and minorities see Jesus very differently than in the past. The continuing exposure to other cultures will produce a blending of ideas and the real Jesus is put forward in a different light than in the past.

### **Chapter 10**

#### **The Doctrine of Salvation**

##### **Current Issues**

##### **The Extent of Salvation**

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.179.

The question involves how many people will actually be saved in the end. There is a growing acceptance of the idea that all people eventually will be saved. The past position of the Catholic and Protestant churches supported the idea of a limited number of people who would be saved. This group would be comprised only of people who have expressed saving faith in the person of Jesus Christ; the Catholics would also include membership in their church.

With the problem of universalism coming to the forefront, this exclusive position is beginning to weaken. Two positions on the topic have surfaced. The first position contends that Christianity is not the only way to God, that other faiths hold some merit as well. While these different religions express their belief in God differently than Christians they are still acceptable to God. Amazingly the Catholic <sup>53</sup>Church has shown some acceptance of this position regarding other religious practices. Vatican II revealed a willingness to speak about degrees of membership into the Catholic Church. Protestants outside the church are now referred to as “separated brethren,” with a special link to the church. Even people with no Christian identification or belief are also considered linked to the church. The idea seems to be that these people outside the church, are Christian and don’t know it.

Even the evangelical community has shown signs of accepting a broader view of salvation than they have in the past. This opens the door to believe that all men will eventually be saved in this life or the next. The reason that the new position is taking hold must be attributed to the expanding exposure to the rest of the world. People from other cultures and other religious beliefs have moved into our neighborhoods. The emotional factor is another cause for this change in position. Many people just cannot accept the idea of God sending anyone to hell for eternity; a universal salvation fits better into the thinking of most people.

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<sup>53</sup> *bid.*, p.182.

The lack of success of Christians to change or evangelize the rest of the world is causing some to take a hard look at the message of the Christian church.

For many the idea of failing to convert Hindus and Muslims is a problem, but if they are actually already Christians and don't know it the problem goes away.

### **Annihilationism**

A related issue can be expected to gain popularity especially among evangelicals. This group will continue to resist the idea of universal salvation for everyone, but they may be open to the idea of Annihilationism for those who are not saved in the end. This position offers the idea of the lost simply fading away into nothingness, they simply cease to exist in any form. They do not experience salvation and the benefits of it, but neither will they experience eternal judgment, pain and suffering.

### **The Nature of Salvation**

The traditional understanding of salvation states that man was separated from a holy righteous god and needed to be reconciled back. The main idea is that man wronged a righteous holy god and a payment needed to be made for the sin committed. There seems to be a shift from us wronging god, to one of god taking care of my need, difficulty and pain. So salvation becomes a benefit of the human, what God demands are secondly. Life and its quality here and now have become relatively more important in comparison with eternal salvation in heaven.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.189.

For evangelicals the shift goes away from holiness to wholeness, or from my desire to honor God to concern over satisfying my own needs. The needs of people should be a concern for any ministry, but to place personal needs above personal holiness will have a serious problem in time.

### **The Blurring of the Popular Understanding of Salvation**

The old songs were full of the message of salvation, God's grace, forgiveness, service, but today the music lacks the specific details of scripture that was found previously. If people do not get more exposure to the details of our salvation they will lose the focus and understanding of what it really involves. A narrowing view of salvation will emerge which will be a shadow of the real thing. This will allow people to embrace false views of salvation based upon their limited knowledge.

### **Faith and Works**

There has always been some debate over the relationship between faith and works. The argument involves the degree of acceptance of Jesus. Does one simply have to believe in Jesus to be saved or is there some corresponding commitment required as well? The nature of one's conversion is the problem. One side says that anything required is works and therefore heresy. The other side says that simple head knowledge and agreement is not enough to produce salvation.

### **Sanctification and the Secular World**

The relationship of the believer to the rest of the world is a critical question that many struggle with. Some simply try to leave the main society, like the Amish. For others they become a part of it, but try to be separate within it. In the past some have hidden away in monasteries in an attempt to be shielded from the effects of a sinful world.

The evangelicals understand separation as being in the world but not part of the world. They would basically resist many activities, such as politics, in order to be separate. But, that changed and evangelicals began getting involved in every area of society in an attempt to change it. The result has been a difficult time in recognizing the difference between the sacred and secular. The Christian today does not show much distinction between himself and the world at large. At some point a movement away from contact with the world should form.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Influencing the Direction of Theology**

#### **Proper Attitude**

##### **Seriousness About the Issues**

Our attitude will determine to what degree any changes will take place. It is easy to fall into the mindset that says it is what it is and we cannot change anything. We must recognize our potential for good or evil based upon our actions. If we really believe strongly in a matter we will work to protect and support that position. The future of the church has been committed to us by the Lord Jesus and we need to take our role seriously and contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints.

##### **Focus on the Bigger Issues**

It is easy to get bogged down with personal matters of little interest to other people. If we can see the bigger picture and be willing to take a stand and work, we can impact the future.

##### **Willingness to Be Prophetic**

Books dealing with the issues that will be important to the future church and of theology are beginning to appear. Some attention should be given to these thoughts with a desire to direct the future and not simply react to it.

Some believe the church is like the frog in the kettle, slowly being cooked to death. If the church is not careful it will simply become like the world with no distinguishing features or value.

### **Values Requisite to Influencing Theology**

If we do not stand for something, what is the point of existing? The very things that we hold as important actually shape and control our lives. The sharing of our values should motivate us to action. Money is always a key ingredient in any policy decision, what a church is willing to pay for shows the heart of that church.

### **Ethical Lifestyle**

Our ethics and lifestyle shout about our values. If we are going to influence theology and the world our lives must be in biblical order. Our beliefs and practices need to be formed from the bible. The Bible needs to be our basis to develop our standards of Christian belief and practice. It is easy to form our standards to fit what we want to do, and then construct a theology to support or justify them. This tendency to mold theology to fit our comfort level is a subjective reason why correct ethics and lifestyle are so important. Remember that our credibility will determine how people respond to what we proclaim.

The world may not like our standards but they expect us to keep them. They will only respect what we say if we live what we profess. Sometimes we seek to exercise our Christian liberty, simply to prove that we are not legalists. The danger is going too far and set aside some of our standards that the secular world notices and then mocks.

### **A High Priority for the Theological Enterprise**

Theological enterprise should be a high priority for the church. For the most part this has been seen as not very important. If we do not stress the importance of sound theology in every area of our ministry, the entire ministry will suffer. Theological study and education is

vital the well being of any ministry. The failure to encourage students to go on to further education risks our future.

### **Research Professorships**

If individual schools would encourage theological enterprise by creating professorships primarily aimed at persons pursuing scholarship, a tremendous benefit would emerge in time. Those we educate today will be the teachers tomorrow, if they are not well equipped today how can do any more in the future? Churches need to be far-sighted enough to invest in their future theology.

### **Striving for Excellence**

For some the recognition of the need for theological scholarship is clear. We need to set high levels of expectation for our church leaders, accepting less will produce less. Handling the pressures of everyday life can detract from the desire to spend more time in research and study, but we cannot afford to allow that excuse too prevent us from doing what we can in the battle for excellence.

### **Provision for the Preparation of Future Theologians**

The question of who will carry on after us is a valid one. If we are not preparing young people to take our place the future will be very bleak. Once we have identified those who have an ability and desire to serve, we need to help them accomplish as much as possible. In promoting graduate study we should be careful not to force some who are not able to handle such responsibilities, but encourage all who can. A clear mission statement would be helpful in determining the direction of such endeavors.

### **Establishment of Theological Think Tanks**

There are political think tanks, why not theological think tanks? They could be set up on a similar basis as those which already exist, but clearly with a different goal. One of their

objectives could be the underwriting of individual scholarship and the funding of leaves of absence to free academicians for concentrated periods of study.<sup>55</sup> Predicting and influencing the future of theology requires more than one person. A group commitment to research and development of ideas would be very useful and probably productive.

### **Improved Communication of Doctrine**

We need to commit to a major education of our people concerning the content of the Bible. Apparently there is a growing division between what one says they believe, and what they practice in everyday life. Perhaps more emphasis needs to be given to practical application of Biblical principles in the life of believers.

### **Christian Education**

It is clear that a large number of people believe in the authority of the Bible, but they also lack serious understanding of its contents. Christianity works for those who believe it and practice it.<sup>56</sup> We should attempt to help people understand what they say they believe in a practical way, and the implications of those beliefs.

New and creative ways need to be developed to attract and hold the interest of people. Sunday School had a very big impact in the past, but is now declining in attendance and popularity. Something that addresses the issues of today and the needs of today must be found to replace what Sunday School used to provide. Our young people are particularly at risk today, being bombarded by the media, radio, and television. All the while taking in a variety of information that is not helpful or useful, but actually harmful to their thinking. The goal is to present the doctrines of the Bible in an interesting and meaningful way. When we present the Scriptures as authoritative and beneficial to our growth and help, perhaps more interest will be given to it.

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>56</sup>Walter A. Elwell, "Belief and the Bible: A Crisis of Authority?" *Christianity Today* 24.6 (March 21, 1980): 23.

## **Drama**

There are a variety of mediums which can be used to teach, drama is a good example. Young people seem to respond well to the visual message from a drama presentation. The concern must be for the content; the drama must be biblically accurate and relative to the audience. The pastor should consider revising his presentation to include, narrative, monologue, dialogue, parables and everyday situations.

## **Music**

Drama is just one avenue to help reach young adults. Another method would be the creative use of music. Not everyone is going to like the same style of music, taking that into consideration; the worship service could incorporate some variety. It is hard to get young people involved when they cannot relate to the subject matter. Being willing to have variety will open the door for more people to participate.

## **Penetration of Influential Social Spheres**

### **The Media**

There are a number of areas that Christians need to get involved in order to impact our society. One primary field is the media. Hollywood shows a bias and even contempt for Christian thought and practice. If more believers would get involved perhaps that attitude would change, or at least be lessened. Patrick Buchanan wrote, “We live in an age where the public ridicule of blacks is forbidden, where anti-Semitism is punishable by political death, but where Christian-bashing is a popular indoor sport, and films mocking Jesus Christ are considered avant-garde.”<sup>57</sup>

The media certainly has sway over the general public by the way they portray characters as typical and their values as normal. The choice of what to put in an article and what to leave out is huge in the final understanding or perception of the reader. Much of the impact from

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<sup>57</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, “Hollywood’s War on Christianity,” *Washington Times*, 27 July 1988, p.F3.

the media is gradual and subtle over a period of time. We must target the media if we are going to have a fighting chance in the hearts and minds of population. Presently there is no opportunity for open debate of the issues. We can change values by changing those who set the values.

### **The Teaching Profession**

Another major opportunity to change the culture can be through the teachers that train and mold the next generation. Since one of the major problems we face today is relativism and naturalism, we should attack them where they begin, in the schools and universities. Progress is being made, but the results will take some time to trickle down to the local church. Many churches today are surrendering without a fight because of numerical and financial reasons.

### **College-Age Christians**

It would be logical to think that our present Christian Colleges would be a good source for producing young leaders who will challenge the current trends. The facts seem to indicate that our Christian Colleges are becoming very secular and have lost their edge in the war against the secularization of our society. The schools seem intent on preparing their graduates to fit into the present society rather than to fight for changes that are clearly needed. Many Christian organizations that minister on secular campuses are often very effective in bringing people to Christ and presenting the Christian message.

### **The Home Schooling Movement**

The home schooling movement has taken on major strength and seems to be growing. As the schools continue to fail in the area of ethics, morality and biblical directives, the home school movement will continue to grow. Perhaps this will offset the decline of the Sunday School movement.

### **Senior Citizens**

With a growing older population a new or at least different field may be opening. While older people are not as receptive to the Gospel as young people, yet they still have a desire to learn and be useful. They also have more time and interest in public and social issues. Since they are the most religious and have a stronger biblical base, they should be a prime consideration to get involved in the fight.

### **The Tasks of Seminaries**

#### **Integration of Theory and Practice**

Seminaries are often seen as isolated ivory towers, which have no practical relationship to society as a whole. Many of the instructors have never served in the actual positions they are preparing students to enter or they have served so long ago that they have lost touch with the present day issues. The problem is a lack of integration of theory and practice. There is no substitute for hands on experience.

Christian theology is not merely a philosophy seeking to describe reality. It is whole world-views; and as such, one of its elements is the pragmatic or experiential dimension.<sup>58</sup>

#### **Research for the Church**

Seminaries need to continue to be the research arm of the local church. This research should be in conjunction with the training and equipping of future church leaders. A closer connection with Christian pollsters would aid in the direction of the research undertaken by the universities. The pollsters could give an early indication of the popular issues and movement in our society.

Our population is moving away from the authority of the clergy and looking more to the laity for answers and direction for the church. This can be seen in the number of small bible study groups forming with no pastor or trained clergy to lead them.

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<sup>58</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Where Is Theology Going*, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI., 1994) p.220.

### **Identification and Development of Needed Leadership Qualities**

Seminaries should consider changing their emphasis on providing full-time professional leadership for the church, to training and equipping the laity. Another approach would be to stress and encourage the future pastors to develop a sense of entrepreneurship. Creativity and imagination would be highly valuable in today's environment.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This book has been a real eye opener for me. I have been brought face to face with more issues than I can number at this point. While I understood that times are different and things are changing, I can see clearly why many of these things have taken place. I believe that Erickson has presented a powerful and stimulating presentation of the history and the direction of theology. While many of his thoughts are speculative, in regards to the future direction of theology, I believe he has painted a wide canvas that is very possible. This book should be required reading for all serious minded students of the Word, who are in positions of leadership. In fact this would be a good book for all Christians to read.

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