Alister McGrath

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Evangelicalism has always been suspicious of the academic world, and quite rightly so! In the first place, there is anxiety about the secularism, relativism and pluralism that seem to be endemic in much of today's American higher education. Evangelicals – and, increasingly, many others as well – have noted with growing concern the indications that the modern American academy seems to have more to do with élitism, ideological warfare and rampant anti-religious propaganda than with learning. Some academic theologians have often seemed to be little more than acolytes to these trends, affirming what often turn out to be profoundly illiberal theologies and firing both their opponents and less than totally enthusiastic colleagues, rather than engaging in the dialogue for which the academy was once noted, honoured and valued. Many state universities give the impression that they have become little more than Institutes of Political Correction. It is very difficult to read works such as Paul C. McGlasson's *Another Gospel: A Confrontation with Liberation Theology* (1994) without being concerned about the 'theological fascism' that seems to be rampant in some liberal seminaries.

Then there is the issue of relevance. Why bother with higher education? The important thing is to get on with preaching the gospel. Anything else is irrelevant. And the issue of relevance is top of the agenda for many evangelicals. As John E. Smith points out in his major study of 1963, *The Spirit of American Philosophy*: 'It is no exaggeration to say that in American intellectual life, irrelevant thinking has always been considered to be the cardinal sin.' Evangelicalism has always shown itself to be at its best in insisting that the gospel is deeply relevant to the life of ordinary people. So why risk side-tracking evangelicalism from some seriously relevant activity by suggesting that it become more concerned about academic issues?

Those who are concerned with understanding the contemporary state of North American evangelicalism will find the three works to which I refer in this short article deeply rewarding. Each, in different ways, explores aspects of the ways in which evangelicalism has responded to a number of pressures in modern American culture. In each case, the authors regard the outcome to be unsatisfactory.

The two of the three that have been out longest are authored by David Wells of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, *No Place for Truth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993) and by Mark Noll, of Wheaton College, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994). Wells argues forcefully that evangelicalism has lost whatever grasp it once had of the importance of systematic theology. The strongly pragmatic nature of the movement has, he suggests, led to an emphasis on church growth, feel-good preaching and styles of ministry informed largely by secular psychology. The role of classical theology has become seriously eroded, with evangelical seminaries failing to allot it the place of honour it was once universally acknowledged as possessing. No longer is theology regarded as integral to maintaining and nourishing Christian identity in the world, or as a seminal resource in forging new approaches to ministry. Instead, it has become preoccupied with 'a technology of practice' and 'techniques with which to expand the church and master the self that borrow mainly from business management and psychology'. There is a widespread consensus within American evangelicalism that Wells has identified a real and worrying trend within the movement. Although some of his critics have suggested that his particular presentation of these defects is a little overstated, Wells makes some wise and helpful comments concerning the causes and possible consequences of this neglect of

theology. The work remains a fundamental challenge to American evangelicalism to keep a strong sense of theological identity.

A criticism of a somewhat different nature is set out by Noll. Armed with a masterly knowledge of the history of American evangelicalism, Noll suggests that evangelicalism is, as a matter of fact, quite well served by its theologians, and points to leading writers such as James I. Packer and Thomas C. Oden to make his point. The real problem is not that evangelicalism has neglected its theology; it is that it has failed to do anything of cultural significance with it. As a result, evangelicalism has largely failed to have any significant impact on the world of letters, art, drama or music, save in a kind of Christian sub-culture. The 'scandal of the evangelical mind' thus lies in the fact that, in the recent past, evangelicals have failed to allow their faith to shape their understanding of the world, and to engage with it.

Noll's work is superbly written, and can be seen as the 'lament of a wounded lover' – someone who is deeply committed to evangelicalism, yet saddened and hurt by its failings. While sharing Wells's concern for theology, Noll does not regard evangelicalism as suffering from serious neglect in this area. Rather, his concern is to move on from a theological foundation to intellectual cultural engagement – an engagement which he believes (and the evidence he musters is persuasive) to be distinctly lacking at present. Noll's plea is for evangelicalism to take its cultural task seriously, and foster evangelical contributions in this presently neglected area.

The third book is by Don Carson, well known for his many writings in the field of NT studies. Entitled *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), it explores the way in which the rise of postmodernism has provided a challenge to evangelicalism. Carson chooses to focus on the area of NT interpretation (an excellent decision), and is able to set out clearly the many weaknesses of postmodern hermeneutics. Readers of *Themelios* who are active in any literary field will find his criticisms of postmodern theory persuasive and helpful. Perhaps I have misunderstood Carson at some points; however, I gained the impression that he regards postmodernism as a *uniformly* negative matter. My own impression is that it does indeed have serious weaknesses; nevertheless, it at least allows evangelicalism to throw off its enslavement to Enlightenment rationalism, which has so hindered its spiritual and theological vitality in the first half of the present century. Postmodernism, like the modernism which it aims to displace, is best viewed as containing both opportunities and challenges for evangelicalism. It is the task of theologians to distinguish these. While I personally have considerable doubts about the merits of postmodernism, it does at least allow us to shake off the 'evangelical rationalism' that has managed to infiltrate North American evangelicalism at a number of points.

The general conclusion of these works is that evangelicalism has a lot of work to do – recovering the importance of theology, engaging with the 'shakers and movers' of modern Western culture, and ensuring that evangelical approaches to NT interpretation and the distinctiveness of the gospel are not compromised through the pervasive influence of postmodernism. These are genuine concerns, and I have no intention of dismissing or trivializing them. Others could easily be added to the list.

So why does the kind of serious cultural and academic engagement suggested (although in very different ways) by each of these writers matter to evangelical students? The story is told of a conversation between two of the most celebrated German liberal Protestant theologians of the nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack. The more conservative sections of the German Protestant churches had recently gained some significant political victories, and seemed poised to eliminate a threat posed by liberalism.

Ritschl's advice to Harnack is reported to have been something like this: 'Never mind about the politics – get on with writing the books that will change the way people think. In the long term, that is what will be of decisive importance.' As one looks at the sustained gains made by liberalism in German Protestantism up to the eve of the First World War, the wisdom of Ritschl's advice is clear. To win the long-term victories, you have to influence the way in which a rising generation thinks.

But why should we want to do this? Would it not be a distraction from the real work of evangelism and pastoral care? I concede that we must ensure that these are not neglected, and my dream has to do with supplementing these concerns, not displacing or replacing them. But the goals are laudable, and the results potentially enormously significant. Evangelicalism has been given a hard time in the liberal arts colleges of North America and colleges in the United Kingdom, generally being depicted as intellectually vacuous, culturally destructive and spiritually simplistic. Evangelicalism is portrayed as something you grow out of, not something you grow up within. I am quite sure that evangelicalism, firmly grounded in the truth and relevance of the Christian gospel, has the potential to extend its influence into the higher education sphere. Not only would this invalidate the seductive stereotypes that are force-fed to our students; it could also lead to the values and beliefs of evangelicalism percolating into areas of our culture where it is at present a silent absence.

Others have seen the wisdom of encouraging such engagement. In the period immediately following the Second World War, the World Council of Churches secured funding to allow it to launch a program to encourage potential theological educators in emerging nations to be taught at leading Western seminaries. Needless to say, these seminaries tended to be strongly liberal in their orientation. The result? Countless seminaries in developing nations found that their faculties began to be dominated by people who had received their PhDs from institutions dominated by a liberal ethos. By a gradual process, which mingled osmosis and replication, those seminaries often drifted into sharing that same liberal ethos. That lesson has been learned. John R.W. Stott, who is widely celebrated as one of global evangelicalism's wisest and most discerning leaders, saw the importance of this point, and set up a program in England to encourage such emerging leaders to gain PhDs at educational institutions which were either evangelical, or sympathetic to evangelicalism. The results of that program – named the 'Langham Trust', after Stott's flagship church of All Souls, Langham Place, London – have been substantial.

In their individual ways, the three books to which I have referred affirm the need for evangelicals to take their theology seriously, and to apply it to life in the world. They help us shape a vision of what is needed if evangelicalism is to advance in the next millenium. Each of the authors is a senior and respected leader and thinker. I recommend *Themelios* readers to read and digest them; I urge them even more strongly to act on their basis, and begin to shape a vision for the future.