Editor's Notes

The evangelical emperor has no clothes. According to D.G.Hart, in ***Deconstructing Evangelicalism–Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham,***[1] the evangelical colossus of the late 20th century that emerged from the fragmented and defensive fundamentalism of the early 20th century is not all that it is made out to be by its proponents. Writing as an unreconstructed American Old School Presbyterian, Hart subjects evangelicalism to a sharp historical and, to a lesser extent, theological critique and finds it wanting. His basic thesis is that what we know as evangelicalism in North America was the result of the efforts of post-war moderate fundamentalists such as Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry and Billy Graham to fashion a conservative Protestant movement that would challenge the liberals who had taken control of the mainstream denominations. As a nomenclature they took a term that had hitherto been synonymous with orthodox Protestantism. The problem was that in the process they also adopted a minimalist approach to doctrine and marginalized the church. The integrated doctrinal systems of Protestant orthodoxy were supplanted by atomized doctrinal statements, and loyalty to the church by loyalty to a plethora of para-church organizations and personalities.

Hart has a number of targets in his sights. He particularly questions the emergence of evangelical history and accuses its practitioners such as Mark Noll, George Marsden, Nathan Hatch and David Bebbington of carving out a nice academic niche at the expense of the older discipline of ecclesiastical history. He makes the same charge about evangelical social scientists with their passion for quantifying religious phenomena. He goes on to expose the weakness of the new evangelicalism's ecclesiology and excessive individualism, its approach to doctrine (here questioning the elevation of inerrancy to the primary defining doctrine) and the impact of contemporary worship music. I don't think Hart listens to worship CDs in his car. All this is done with considerable wit and brio. For example, he rather cheekily defines being an evangelical as whether or not one likes Billy Graham.

I think that Hart, who has taught at Westminster Seminary in both Philadelphia and Escondido, is broadly right in his critique of the confessional and ecclesiastical shallowness of contemporary evangelicalism. However, he overstates his case. Surely after the rise of modernism and the battles of the early 20th century, evangelicalism was bound to become a distinct movement within the broader Protestant world, with a just claim to being considered the heir of orthodox Protestantism, but it a pity that the post-war leaders didn't give greater emphasis to the church and avoid a lowest common denominator approach to doctrine. It also has to be said that Hart's analysis doesn't quite fit what happened in Britain. Here evangelicalism has had a more distinct identity, largely because of the High Church tradition in Anglicanism. It was that and the threat of Rome that prompted the founding of the Evangelical Alliance in 1841. But it was still essentially orthodox Protestantism as was the evangelicalism of British post-war leaders such as D.M. Lloyd-Jones and John Stott. Indeed it was their concern for the ecclesiastical expression of evangelicalism that led to their disagreement in 1966. Also it is difficult to see how inerrancy would not become a defining doctrine, considering the modernist attack Scripture. But looking at evangelicalism today, much of that has been ignored or forgotten. But now the important question is less where evangelicalism came from than what it is becoming. It seems to me that here and around the world it is mutating into forms such as prosperity Pentecostalism or open theism that are different in kind from historic Protestantism. We need then to

heed Hart's counsel and return to the orthodox faith of our fathers as it is expressed in the communion of saints.

One of the 20th century leaders who exemplified the confessional and ecclesiastical evangelicalism Hart advocates was J. Gresham Machen, the Princeton professor, founder of Westminster Seminary and leader of conservative Presbyterians in the modernist controversy of the 1920s and 30s in the United States. Hart is probably the greatest authority on Machen. In ***J. Gresham Machen – Selected Shorter Writings***[2] Hart brings together a number of Machen's articles, papers, reviews and addresses. The core of the book is the chapters taken from a volume posthumously published in 1951 and entitled *What is Christianity?*, but never republished. These lucidly elegant chapters (Machen was a fine stylist as well as a courageous theologian) deal not only with basic Christian doctrines, but also with the church and its mission and the influence of Christianity in society. While Machen was no advocate of the church's involvement in politics, he did believe that Christians as individuals and through voluntary associations such as schools should have a great deal of influence. He has some excellent things to say on education. Politically Machen was something of a civil libertarian who loathed the centralizing tendencies of modern governments. Rightly he considered that political freedom was one of Calvinism's greatest legacies to the world. I think his political theology was a little superficial in places and perhaps reflected too much of his American cultural context. Nevertheless he has some stimulating things to say about pluralism and toleration. Interestingly he was not an optimist as to the church's prospects in the world and, while to some extent he may have been influenced by his bitter experience in the modernist controversy, he argues his case biblically. He was a theological realist and as such has much wisdom for Christians today living as a minority in an increasingly pagan society. I found his repeated call for the church to concentrate on its God-given task of proclaiming the gospel particularly challenging. To these chapters are added others that cover a wide range of subjects from Machen's battles in the Presbyterian Church to the minister and his Greek New Testament, to the joys of mountain climbing and walking. What comes through is just what a rich and full human being Machen was. Often he is seen as the brilliant scholar and doughty defender of the faith, but here we discover something of his humanity and largeness of soul. I found this to be one of the most interesting and stimulating books that I have recently read.

Hart makes the point that Machen' social vision was very different from that of Calvin and much of the Reformed tradition. Certainly within that tradition there is a tension as to how much transformation we can expect. **Lester De Koster** reminds us of the more optimistic strand in ***Light for the City – Calvin's Preaching, Source of Life and Liberty.***[3] This book brings together two passions of mine – Calvin and the city. The book is simply about the spiritually, socially and culturally transforming power of Calvin's preaching in Geneva and as such is a plea for such preaching today. At points De Koster is a bit naïve about what would happen if there was such preaching, but he has a point. Calvin sought to change the world not by force but by the word. And he did, as Western history bears witness. As Emile Leonard, the eminent historian of Protestantism, wrote: 'Calvin invented a new kind of man in Geneva – Reformation man – and in him sketched out what was to become modern civilisation.'
I don't think that Machen would disagree with that or that we should aspire to do the same, but only that we need to be realists in terms of the reality of

sin in the Christian, the church and the world, something Calvinists have not always been good at. Let me add one caveat. In spite of John De Witt's comment that De Koster writes like Carlyle, I didn't find the style easy, but then I don't find Carlyle's easy either.

Let me mention a few books that will help us understand our culture as we try to influence it through the preaching of the gospel. **Marcus Honeysett's *Meltdown*[4]** is a lucid analysis of contemporary culture that in a short compass gives us an overview of the challenges of post-modernism to historic Christianity and suggestions on how to meet them as evangelicals. Like Paul visiting Athens we need to spend time looking at our culture so that we are able to connect the gospel with it. Popular culture – music, TV, literature, IT, fashion, films, advertizing, shopping, sports, etc.– is all-pervasive and shapes unconsciously the way not only non-Christians but also Christians think and live. Two recent books help us to approach popular culture as Christians. **T.M. Moore's *Pop Culture – A Kingdom Approach*[5]** is written from a distinctly Reformed perspective. In assessing pop culture he is critically sympathetic and avoids condemning it outright. As with any culture, Christians need to be discerning, and Moore supplies us with a biblical worldview that is centred on God's kingdom. His concern is to see the reign of God transforming culture. This book is a very accessible way of developing a Christian mind in relation to culture along the lines of Francis Schaeffer. More comprehensive but less theologically discerning is ***A Matrix of Meanings – Finding God in Popular Culture*[6]** by **Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor.** The book is almost encyclopaedic in breadth and covers a vast amount of material, and the authors are very penetrating and insightful in their understanding of the various aspects of popular culture. The book suffers from not having Moore's theological framework and tends as a result to accept everything that calls itself Christian at face value. Nevertheless it is a real eye-opener to popular culture, especially if you prefer Radio 3 to Radio 1. The danger with this whole area is that we can think that our preaching and evangelism will only be effective if we are up on the latest cultural trends. In the end our confidence is in God's word. But surely any normal human being wants to understand his or her culture so that they can relate to it in a godly way. Failure to do so may mean not only that our preaching and evangelism, not to mention raising children, don't connect, but also that we may think we are living godly lives when in fact we are very conformed to the world.

Two other books deserve the attention of evangelicals. **Clive Marsh** is a liberal Methodist minister who has written ***Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age*.[7]** I must admit that I approached this book sceptically, but was in fact quite impressed with it. Marsh writes with 'an unashamedly missionary purpose'. In part this is to present what he calls 'a chastened liberalism' to people on the edge of the church or beyond who are put off by traditional Christianity. It is liberal Christianity that he presents. He has no time for an absolute religion and doesn't expect Hindus, Jews or Muslims to become Christians. But it is a chastened liberalism that is less confident of the claims of human reason and more open to spiritual reality. It is in fact a religion that I think many people will increasingly be attracted to. That is why evangelicals need to take it seriously. This is a Christianity that is more in tune with the culture than orthodox Protestantism and to which some from evangelical churches will be drawn. Read this book with a discerning eye, but also learn from the many

insightful things Marsh has to say about British culture and church life.

The sort of people who might be attracted to a chastened liberalism is the subject of a ***Churchless Faith – Faith Journeys beyond the churches***[8] by **Alan Jamieson**, a New Zealand Baptist minister. He observed that a number of seemingly committed Christians were leaving churches and going nowhere and yet still called themselves Christians. The book is the result of a study he undertook of these churchless believers. In different ways most became dissatisfied with evangelical church life. He particularly examines what he calls 'evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic church leavers' or EPCs. From his description of these people, most seem to have been involved in broadly charismatic churches. I don't have space here to sum up the process of disenchantment and disengagement that Jamieson describes. However, it seems to me that many of these people simply discovered the unreality of so much that passes for evangelicalism and decided to drop it. In the end Jamieson suggests developing what he calls leaver-sensitive churches that are committed to discussion, openness, doubt, questioning and very much about being on a journey than having arrived at a destination. I think that there is much that classical evangelicals can learn here. All of us know people who have left our churches and are nowhere or are drifting to less than satisfactory forms of Christianity. While being convinced of what we believe, we must make room for those who are asking questions. Nevertheless what Jamieson highlights is the unreality of so much modern evangelicalism. What our churches need to be are communities of faith, hope and love where everyone is welcome and lives are transformed by God's grace. On that point let me finally mention **Steve Chalke's** now notorious ***The Lost Message of Jesus***.[9] The implications of his denial of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement are serious.He asks where on earth did we get this doctrine? The simple answer is in the Bible. Strangely, in his own handling of the Bible Chalke conveniently omits the bits he doesn't like, such as Jesus' teaching on hell. Much of the book seems to me to be simplistic, clichéd and ironically conventional criticisms of evangelicalism. In some parts he is simply ignorant as in his criticism of Jonathan Edwards' sermon 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God'. He objects to Edwards' doctrine of hell and wants more preaching of God's love and yet no-one preached more sublimely of God's love than Edwards. But there are some good things in the book as well, such as what he says about the kingdom and repentance and in some of his criticisms of churches. My hunch is that Chalke is himself facing up to the unreality of so much contemporary evangelicalism, but tragically his diagnosis and thus his prescription are disastrously wrong.

1. D.G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism– Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 224 pages, ISBN 0-8010-2728-4.
2. D.G. Hart (ed.), *J.Gresham Machen– Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 590 pages, ISBN 0-87552-57-9.
3. Lester De Koster, *Light for the City - Calvin's Preaching, Source of Life and Liberty* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 139 pages, ISBN 0-8028-2780-2.
4. Marcus Honeysett, *Meltdown - Making Sense of a Culture in Crisis* (Leicester: IVP, 2002), 223 pages, ISBN 0-85111-492-X.
5. T.M. Moore, *Pop Culture – A Kingdom Approach* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 167 pages, ISBN 0-87552-576-8.
6. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meaning - Finding God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 351 pages, ISBN 0-8010-2417-X.
7. Clive Marsh, *Christianity in a Post-Atheist Age* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 149 pages, ISBN 0-334-02869-8.
8. Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith – Faith Journeys beyond the churches* (London: SPCK, 2002), 179 pages, ISBN 0-281-0546-7.
9. Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 204 pages, ISBN 0-310-2488205.