Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality of Illusion?
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Chapter One, “Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective” by Bruce Hindmarsh

In this essay, Hindmarsh puts evangelicalism in its historical context and draws conclusions about our ecclesiology from that. He comes down to three main points, which he draws from the writings of George Whitefield but implies are true more broadly:

1. There is no distinctively evangelical form of church order. Rather, the focus is on right belief, the ability to articulate a personal testimony of God’s ongoing work in one’s life, etc. The church is “essentially pneumatic.” (p. 32)

2. The mystical church is discernible among the divided visible churches. “The church is not constituted by stated ecclesiastical authority but by an elective affinity of a spiritual sort.” (p. 33)

3. The oxymoron of evangelical ecclesiology is that while celebrating the spiritual union of all the truly regenerate, the movement itself was dogged by separatism. “If one rejects visible order [church hierarchies], one will sooner or later simply fill the vacuum with another form of visible organization . . . The evangelical societies, the ecclesiola, were articulated around the leaders themselves.” (pp. 34-35)

Hindmarsh makes an observation which I found especially pertinent to the idea of ecclesiology within evangelicalism. He goes back to Philip Jakob Spener’s Pia Desideria and highlights Spener’s “fresh ecclesiological perspective. He envisaged regenerate believers not as a separate church but as a collegia pietatis, a college of piety, that might help renew the Lutheran Church. Groups of believers were to be small churches within the church, ecclesiola in ecclesia.” (p. 24, emphasis mine) He points out a contemporary parallel to Spener in the thinking of Englishman Josiah Woodward, and asserts that the Moravian movement under Zinzendorf picked up and advanced this same idea. This same idea is present in the Evangelical Revival, the ecclesiastical configuration of which was the small group (e.g. Wesley’s “class meetings”).

How interesting that so many of the movements of evangelicalism have started as reform or revival movements within existing churches. I remember talking with a friend about the beginnings of the Salvation Army; it reflected this. Certainly the Alliance exemplifies this. We so often assert that Simpson never intended to start a denomination; the various branches were made of up of Christians of all stripes who shared the common passion for the deeper life and world missions. And, as Hindmarsh pointed out has been true more broadly in evangelicalism, the organization of the Alliance was articulated around the leader. (One could argue that the charismatic movement follows this same
pattern, with those in the *ecclesiolae* marked by the gift of tongues and other “miraculous” gifts.)

So what to think about this trend? It has the effect, as Hindmarsh shows, of leading to many streams within evangelicalism, each of which associates to varying degrees with the various other streams. Unfortunately, this makes it harder to affirm the creed of “one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church” and to see Jesus prayer in John 17 a visible reality. Yet what is the alternative?

I could see the material presented in this essay supporting a viewpoint that we should worry much less about the visible structure of the church, and that in doing so we would more accurately reflect even the evangelical tradition. Perhaps the church is more a mystery to be experienced with others than an institution or organization to be evaluated, assessed – or even reformed. One could argue that the Church does not need reformation, because the Church consists of those who ________ (are vitally alive in Christ, have been regenerated, are experiencing fellowship with God, whatever criteria one would come up with). By definition, the true Church cannot need reforming. The people in it certainly do, and the human organizations we call “churches” certainly do, but not the real, true Church.

This would lead to a more pneumatic approach to ecclesiology, and perhaps even a *laissez faire* mindset. I think it would be less sacramental. Church architecture would not be a discussion at all; perhaps there would be more talk of the “architecture of our lives” or relationships – not how is a building structured to enhance worship of God, but how are our lives and relationships structured to enhance worship, discipleship, sanctification, etc.

The main criticism of this would be the tendency to faction and cults of personality. How does this view lead to visible unity (assuming visible unity is important)?
Chapter Two, “Recovering a Sacramental and Trinitarian Ecclesiology” by Kerry L. Dearborn

Dearborn draws on examples from Celtic Christianity to illumine what a sacramental and Trinitarian ecclesiology would look like. While admitting that the Celtic Christians had their limitations and failings, and often did not live up to the ideals they expressed, she still finds much to admire. In fact, she says that, “because of its Trinitarian sensibilities, Celtic Christianity can offer evangelicals four significant ecclesial gifts.” (p. 41) They are:

1. A sense of identity that derives from the wonder of who God is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and trust in God's presence with us and for us
2. A sacramental vision flowing from God's presence that perceives the miraculous nature of all life
3. A liturgical rhythm through which the church brings to bear the rich resources of faith to impact every aspect of life
4. An approach to mission that reflects such an identity, sacramental vision, and liturgical rhythm.

She certainly sees these as sequential, with each “gift” informing what follows. Quite persuasively she makes her case that we should pay careful attention to the Celtic Christians.

One thing she pointed out that I had not realized was the extent to which Celtic Christianity drew on Eastern Orthodox ideas and was informed by it. The idea that stuck with me most from this chapter is tied to the third point about the liturgical rhythm. The Celts had prayers for everything – even such seemingly mundane activities as kindling the fire in the morning and smooring it at night. I think if we could incorporate something like this, it would help break down the sacred-secular divide that so many Christians live with. It would help us see God in the midst of our everyday activities. I'm sure there could be a danger in the prayers becoming trite or rote; but I like the idea of, say, turning on my computer being an opportunity to be reminded of something about God and his presence with me. Why not a prayer for when I start my car? Why not an invocation when I brush my teeth? Why not a benediction when I plug my phone into its charger each night?

Dearborn draws a practical implication from the idea that God is present with us. She says,

Living with greater expectation and openness for God to speak and act in the midst of our ecclesial gatherings would reflect our belief that God is present. This would mean resisting the pressure to create highly structured performances as worship services, after the model of a television or radio show. It would also mean valuing smaller and less formal gatherings. (p. 68)
Earlier in her essay she had pointed out that there is no record of the Celts having had large church buildings, but rather small, circular ones.

One thing I am realizing is that there is a very direct link between our idea of what church is or should be, and our church buildings. I guess I knew this already, and certainly have heard Kevin Callahan (our architect for our recent church building project) say it a bunch of times, but it’s striking me at a deeper level. One thing I should think about is what our church building says about our idea of what church should be. What was it Winston Churchill said? “We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.”
Chapter Three, “The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology” by Howard A. Snyder

In this chapter, Snyder argues that “while there is such a thing as evangelical ecclesiology, we might more appropriately speak of evangelical ecclesiolgies, in the plural, and ask what each variety might contribute to the whole.” (p. 77)

Snyder starts by describing four basic worship styles present in North American evangelical church services. He contends that these forms, or hybrids derived from them, are how evangelicals worship. The four forms are:

1. Anglo-Catholic
2. Revivalist
3. Pentecostal-charismatic
4. Rock concert

I must say, he makes a convincing case. He tries very hard to be merely descriptive, although a think I detected a whiff of disapproval as he described the “rock concert” form. While I think most churches (including Risen King) display a mixture of these, it is helpful to identify the historic roots of the forms which have been mixed.

Snyder then goes on to discuss the four classic marks of the church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. He argues that these classic marks by themselves are only somewhat helpful as they are ambiguous and, more significantly, not thoroughly Biblically rooted. He suggests complementing correlatives for each mark in order to give a more comprehensive and Biblical description:

1. The church is many as well as one.
2. The church is charismatic as well as holy.
3. The church is both universal and local.
4. The church is as truly prophetic as it is apostolic.

This discussion was very helpful and makes a lot of sense to me. As Snyder points out, if you hold to the four classic marks alone, they influence you toward a particular kind of ecclesiology; but because the marks do not reflect so much Biblical teaching on the church, that would be inaccurate.

After this, Snyder draws on some of the sociologic al thinking about the church, especially that done by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. I didn’t get a lot out of this section.

Snyder then identifies five historic sources of evangelical ecclesiologies. As with the worship forms, he is arguing that while many evangelical ecclesiologies are actually combinations or hybrids, they draw on these five basic sources. They are:

1. The Anglo-Catholic and Reformed/Lutheran-Catholic heritage. While the Reformation did reform ecclesiology in terms of the
sacraments, the importance of Scripture and therefore preaching, and an increased emphasis on congregational life; there were many ecclesiological continuities, including the acceptance of the clergy-laity division, the state-established church arrangement, and the centrality (in practice and theology) of church buildings and the marginalization or prohibition of house churches.

2. The Radical Reformation and free church tradition. “Because of the double (and in some ways schizophrenic) heritage gained from the magisterial and Radical Reformation, most evangelical bodies have essentially a Lutheran, Reformed, or Wesleyan theology into which are blended or grafted Anabaptist ecclesiological elements.” (p. 94)

3. The revivalist tradition. Snyder contends that the revival movements, especially of Finney and Moody, changed the way people thought about church life; rather than a long, slow, steady progress of sanctification, it was now seen as periodic revivals with implied intervening low points.

4. American democracy

5. American entrepreneurship. “In North America, denominations tend to arise as entrepreneurial enterprises – as do many independent local churches and many evangelistic, missionary and service agencies.” (p. 96)

After describing these five sources, Snyder asks an important question: Where is the Bible in all this? His conclusion: “Strikingly, Scripture is a distinctly remote source in much evangelical ecclesiology.” (p. 96) This is strange, as one of the marks of evangelicalism is the centrality and authority of Scripture.

Snyder concludes the chapter by looking at the ecclesiological thinking of two church leaders: B. T. Roberts, founder of Free Methodism; and A. B. Simpson. His summary of Simpson’s thinking of the church was helpful:

The church is an egalitarian community of believers that gives visible, social witness to the reconciling power of the gospel. But its primary purpose is missions. Simpson believed that the church is essentially missional and that the church’s mission is essentially ecclesiological . . . However, the church is much more than simply a missionary task force. It is to be a visible demonstration of the power of the gospel . . . Simpson did not want a rescue mission but a church that was a mission and a mission that was a fully functioning, self-supporting church.

For Simpson, the key marks of the church are its evangelistic, missionary character (which can be understood as the church’s apostolicity) and its calling to be a visible community of worship and nurture, manifesting the character of Jesus Christ. Given Simpson’s conscious reflection on the nature of the church, it is somewhat misleading to say (as is sometimes claimed) that the Christian and Missionary Alliance was from the beginning simply a missionary society or parachurch organization. While the Christian and Missionary Alliance did not see itself
initially as a denomination, it is clear that Simpson himself was operating with some key ecclesiological convictions. (pp. 100-101)

I think the statement that “the church is essentially missional and that the church’s mission is essentially ecclesiological” is huge. I think this captures the inward-outward tension/reality. The church must reach out missionally; but then it must incorporate those it reaches. In the context of the C&MA, it explains why both missions and church planting (and the training of church leaders) have been such hallmarks of Alliance efforts.

I also like the statements that the church is to be “a visible demonstration of the power of the gospel.” This truth should manifest in several ways – breakdown of class divisions and sanctification being two that come to mind (and, I think, would have come quickly to mind for Simpson).

In blurring the lines between a “mission” and a “church”, I think Simpson was ahead of his time. It seems like these terms will become less and less helpful to keep distinct as our stance toward our culture becomes more like that of missionaries to their field.
Chapter Four, “Evangelical Conversion toward a Missional Ecclesiology” by George R. Hunsberger

This was my least favorite chapter of the book so far. Hunsberger is writing from a “missional church” perspective, which has a lot to commend it. However, I just can’t swallow hook, line and sinker the starting points that come out in many missional church writings. For example, is the corporate gathering of believers as incidental as they (missional church authors) seem to say? Should the mission of the church include the transformation of society (as opposed to the transformation of individuals) as Hunsberger seems to believe?

A significant part of the chapter is Hunsberger tearing apart the Iguassu Affirmation, a statement on missiology, to find the “implicit ecclesiology” in it, which he then eviscerates. I’m not sure this is fair, despite Hunsberger’s convoluted rationale for why this makes a lot of sense. To take a document that is explicitly talking about one subject and critique it for what it doesn’t say about another topic seems unfair to me. In fact, as Hunsberger himself notes, when some of the same contributors write in other contexts about ecclesiology, they actually make some of the same points that he makes.

The points at which I most strongly agreed with Hunsberger are the points which are the least original with him. For example, conversion is perceived as too much of a momentary event and not a process; the church needs to recapture mission as the driving force of its existence; we need to experience true community better; evangelicalism is too individualistic; we shouldn’t think that our understanding of the gospel is complete and fully correct. Great – but none of that is exactly new thinking on Hunsberger’s part.
Chapter Five, “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic: Awaiting the Redemption of Our Body” by Edith M. Humphrey

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, Humphrey tells of her own very interesting ecclesial journey: from Salvation Army to confessing Anglican. Not surprisingly, her essay makes a case for a very high church understanding of the four classic marks of the church. She also makes a case for the sacraments of baptism and communion and concludes with an eschatological hope for the day when the church will be glorified and made perfect.

On the whole, I resonated much more strongly with Snyder’s take on the four marks than Humphrey’s. I appreciated how Snyder went back behind the creedal formulation to Scripture. Humphrey seems to take the creed as inspired, or at least authoritative. (I would say it is authoritative to the extent it accurately reflects the revelation of God about the church in Scripture.) Again, I think Snyder operates much more clearly from this stance. (I almost wonder why Humphrey’s essay is in a volume titled *Evangelical Ecclesiology*.)

If one takes the creed to be authoritative, or at least as an accurate summation of Scriptural imperatives regarding the church, then these four issues need to be addressed. Indeed, Humphrey begins by asking great questions; I just felt that her answers fell short of convincing or helpful, unless one is willing to undergo the same journey she has taken and become either Anglican, Orthodox, or Catholic. I do think that even if we don’t take those four marks as essential, we still do need to wrestle with the Biblical material that seems to refer to the visible unity of the church (John 17, etc.). We also need to come to some conclusion regarding the relationship of individual, local churches to a larger whole. And we have to figure out what it means that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and that apostles are part of God’s gift to the church. Still, I feel that one can honestly ask and answer those questions – in a way that is true to Scripture and history – and not end up at the same conclusions that Humphrey has reached.

Probably I need to balance that paragraph with the acknowledgement that we should not reject the idea of an episcopacy in a knee-jerk sort of way. If we are going to disagree with Catholic and other theologians who understand apostolic succession as essential for the church, then on what grounds are we going to disagree? “I don’t wanna” is not sufficient. There is room for humble soul-searching here: has Enlightenment individualism colored my thinking on this issue?

Likewise with the issue of unity: why not think that what Jesus had in mind, and what God’s highest will for his people would be, is a visibly unified church? On what grounds do we think we should not work to reconcile all church groups under one head? Perceived impracticality is not a good enough reason.
Chapter Six, “Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality: A Unique Compatibility” by Roger Olson

In this chapter Olson makes a thoughtful and spirited defense of free church ecclesiology. He even proposes an “unprovable thesis for consideration – that free church ecclesiology, properly understood, is more compatible with the evangelical Protestant ethos and spirituality, properly understood, than its alternatives.” (p. 162)

Olson starts by talking about the terminology he is going to use – especially the terms “evangelical” and “free church.” He made the helpful observation that these terms are centered-set rather than bounded-set ideas. One cannot determine who is in and who is out; one can only talk of being more or less evangelical, for example. Also, in talking about evangelicalism, he observes that it:

Derives from two main sources and that its defining center is bipolar. On the one hand, evangelicalism is profoundly marked by commitment to the Reformation ideals of sola gratia et fides, sola scriptura, and the priesthood of all believers . . . On the other hand, it is profoundly marked by commitment to the experiential ideal of what has been called conversional piety. (p. 165)

Thus, he says, evangelicalism is committed to both orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopathy (right experience).

Also helpful is Olson’s nuanced approach to the individual nature of evangelicalism. He argues that our faith can be individual without being isolationist or autonomous. He does not yield on the idea that it is essentially important for individuals to have a personal conversion experience. He argues that while this emphasis on the individual can be distorted by the Enlightenment idea of the autonomous individual, it is in no greater danger of distortion than a more hierarchal or community-centered emphasis. It would be interesting to hear a conversation between Hunsberger and Olson on this; Olson specifically endorses an idea that Hunsberger specifically disparaged, that the way to transform societies or communities is to see individuals transformed.

Similarly, Olson defends a free church understanding of the marks of the church. I still prefer Snyder’s pairs of marks, but Olson presents a concise summary of the classic free church defense. The church can be one, holy, catholic and apostolic without being Anglican, Orthodox or Catholic. (Again, the symposium that generated this book must have had its spirited moments; I would have loved to hear Olson and Humphrey go back and forth on this topic.)

Another significant point Olson makes (which flows out of the discussion on the marks) is that a hierarchal episcopacy does not guarantee orthodoxy. In fact, he says,

It is becoming all too apparent that neither clerical hierarchy nor formal creedalism prevents heresy and even apostasy within the churches. . . . The ironic
situation is that in spite of their non-creedalism, the vast majority of free churches in North America has managed to maintain basic Christian orthodoxy better than most of the magisterial, mainline Protestant denominations that are formally creedal and have hierarchies that are supposed to preserve and protect the traditional faith. (pp. 175, 177)
This chapter was not one of the highlights of the book for me. Perhaps this is at least partially due to the fact that I read it at the end of the day and while my mother-in-law (at whose house I was staying) was watching Dr. Phil. At any rate . . . this is one of those instances when an author spends a lot of time making a point to which I say, “Okay . . . kind of already knew that . . .” He really wants to keep Christology central to ecclesiology. So he spends a lot of time affirming that our focus should be on Christ and his work on our behalf, not on our own efforts to be or understand the church. His perspective is evidently influenced by his Reformed affiliation. The reminder that God has chosen us, that all we are, have and do is because of his grace, etc. is always appropriate. It just seemed a little odd, in a volume devoted to ecclesiology, to have an author saying, “Let’s be careful not to focus too much on ecclesiology.”

One highlight of the chapter was a quote from G. K. Chesterton: “The saint . . . will generally be found restoring the world to sanity by exaggerating whatever the world neglects . . . Therefore it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.” (p. 191)

Another great quote was from Alan Lewis: “Ministry is theology’s polygraph, its infallible lie-detecting test, revealing the truth of what the church believes and the identity of whom she worships – the God of the cross or the false deities of her cultural ideology.” (p. 196)

Maybe someday I’ll come back to this chapter, read it when I’m better rested and not brain-fried, and find it to be the most revealing, insightful, prophetic word on ecclesiology ever written. But I doubt it.
The preceding chapters were grouped into three sections. Hindmarsh’s and Dearborn’s chapters were grouped under the heading “Inspirations from Our Heritage.” The second section was “Programmatic Proposals” and included Snyder’s and Hunsberger’s contributions. The third section was “The Best Ecclesiology?” and contained the essays by Humphrey, Olson and Jinkins. The fourth part of the book is brief, consisting of two chapters which are brief responses to the other essays in the book. The first is by Paul F. M. Zahl and titled, “Low Church and Proud.” As the title suggests, Zahl underscores Olson’s points about evangelical ecclesiology necessarily being low church. This is striking because Zahl is, himself, a Protestant Episcopalian. He wonders at the trend of evangelicals to embrace higher church forms of liturgy and government. His suggestion is that these people go the whole way and become Roman Catholic; this reminds me of Paul’s wish that those promoting circumcision so strongly would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!

There is something I noticed in this book that I have noticed in other contexts and conversations, as well: those who convert to a system or denomination (“first generation”) are often more committed to its distinctives than those who grew up in that denomination (second, third, fourth generation). So the newer folks are often more conservative than those who grew up in the system. Certainly this observation holds true in the case of Humphrey and Zahl. Humphrey, as one who moved from the Salvation Army (about as low church as you can get, in not even celebrating Communion) to Anglicanism, is very committed to its hierarchy, the episcopacy, etc. Zahl, who has seen Episcopalianism from the inside for a while, is very candid about its shortcomings.

Zahl criticized Snyder’s method of exploring the four classic marks of the church and modifying them. He says that this whole paradigm is flawed because the Reformers in effect replaced those marks with right teaching of the Word, observing the sacraments of communion and baptism, and church discipline. I’m not sure this criticism is entirely fair for two reasons. First, Snyder was not the only one to structure his essay around those marks; Humphrey did as well, and Olson devotes a few paragraphs to them. So why does Zahl single out Snyder? Second, a big part of Snyder’s point is to show the inadequacy of the marks; yet Zahl seems to think Snyder is defending them.

I also was somewhat puzzled by Zahl’s slam on Dearborn’s look at Celtic Christianity. He says that the whole idea of Celtic Christianity is a “fully realized abstraction” (p. 216) and that she makes the sources say more than they do. He thinks that we do not have enough consistent information about Celtic Christianity to draw the kinds of conclusions she and others draw. While I haven’t researched Celtic Christianity enough to know to what degree Zahl’s opinion is accurate, it did seem to me that Dearborn was careful to reference primary sources (prayer, hymns, invocations) to support her points. Plus, I think a more appropriate response would have been to look at the conclusions she drew and ask, “Regardless of how she arrived at these conclusions, are they good conclusions? Do they conform to Biblical truth? Are they practicable in our contexts?”
The final chapter in the book is a response from Richard Beaton. I resonated with several statements he made about ecclesiology in the evangelical context. He said, “Evangelicalism is in the throes of an identity crisis, and at the heart of this crisis is a lack of clarity concerning the nature and function of the church.” (p. 217) This statement summarizes much of my motivation for choosing this course of study on my sabbatical. If we do not know what the church is, how can we offer plans, strategies and programs to do it better? How can we speak confidently of what a pastor’s role should or should not be? How can we justify designing and raising money for church facilities? How can we make statements about our relationship to the world and the culture around us? How can we evaluate our effectiveness? How can we even arrive at the standards we would use to evaluate our effectiveness?

He also says, “Numerous models of a core identity and message face believers today. What is often left unconsidered is that these overarching models, or metaphors, have the power to shape and transform. They are not mere descriptors; rather, they articulate who we are and even have the power to shape identity.” (p. 219) He concludes his response with a call to re-examine the metaphors that Scripture uses to talk about the church. Again, this reflects my own thinking. Scripture does not give a definition of the church; it describes what the church does but very often does so using metaphors. This makes me wonder if a “define the church” approach can work. Maybe the best we can do is come at this topic with a more indirect approach. Is the church more a mystery to be pondered than a term to be defined?

On the whole, this book was good. As any collection of essays is bound to be, it was somewhat of a mixed bag; some chapters more strongly resonated with my thinking and seemed more soundly reasoned that others. Still, it is a good contribution to the study of evangelical ecclesiology. If I had to pick out main themes that were explored by several authors, I would have to choose the discussion about the marks of the church and the tension between individual faith and corporate identity. While the eclectic approach taken by this volume and The Church in the Bible and in the World definitely has its place, I am looking forward to reading books written by one author, where one train of thought can be developed more thoroughly.