The Way it Is

London as other world-class cities, stands at the proverbial crossroads. It lives at the critical juncture of competing truth claims and cultural expression. The world, as has been said for example, lives between Jihad, the tendency toward parochialism and atomization and McWorld, the relentless gravitational pull of secular homogenization. Will the world inexorably evolve into a cosmopolitan megapolis or will it collapse beneath the blows of militant tribalism? Whose will wins out? Whose ideas will mould the city’s trajectory? 9/11 and 7/7 are also clear reminders that McWorld does not reflect the only totalizing claim in the world. A fully resurgent militant Islam is competing for the heart of the city as well. So does an endlessly customized, privatized spirituality, particularly popular among the elites and chattering classes. Religions whose gods ultimately look like us are always in supply.

If you visit that crossroads, you will also find the church. Balanced on the knife-edge, the evangelical church lives in the place between the way it used to be and the way it must become. As it exists, it totters, trying to understand its own identity in the midst of cultural flux and competing claims to its soul. In a sense, of course, it has to totter. Nothing remains stationary. The issue is the position you adopt and the direction you take. To be sure, everyone knows, even those that pine for some idealized past, that the future is all we have to possess. Even the present is lost right under our noses. We know that we must embrace the future, but what future? What does it mean to embrace it? We know that we have wonderful promises. We know one day that the celestial city to which we all belong will have no place to remind us to worship because we will live in the presence of the
Almighty and the Lamb. We know that it will be lit with the consuming glory of that same lamb, whose light will illuminate the nations (Rev 21:22-27). We know this will happen, even if we don’t really understand what it all means. Our problem is that we somehow must get from here to there. In one sense, of course, this is easy. We know that God will make the way. In another, He seems to want us, to paraphrase T.S. Elliot, to become what we are not by going through the way in which we are not.¹ We are indeed on a journey, but it is very much not an escalator or conveyor belt. In the midst of providence, God still calls for wisdom. When it is all said and done, when our lives become a symphony of prayer, when we commune with the Lord in a living relationship with him, there is yet work to be done and decisions to be made. Indeed, we shall become the new heavens and new earth, but what do we do now? We totter, I know, but what would God have us do?

The question, “What should we do?” has to met with the response, “That depends. Who are you?” Who is the church? This is not a trivial matter. W. Tullian Tchividjian writes, “At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the church faces an identity crisis unparalleled in its history.”² For most of us, when we close our eyes and imagine the answer, the church looks very much like us. It is European or American. It either speaks English or some language we had inflicted on us in school, not I might add, seminary, like French, Spanish, or German. Like old furniture, it has a feel to it. Layer after layer of stain, oil, and polish contribute to the look and feel. If one holds a light to it, the dim patina of the reformation might be discerned. The surface layer of polish smells more like modernism, even if the bottle reads “evangelical” on it. The deeper apostolic, patristic, and medieval layers may not be seen at all, though they may still be intuited.

In my home, we have many books seated on rather cheap shelves, IKEA affairs, made up of pressed particle board, finished to look like solid wood. It isn’t the real thing, but from a distance you might think mahogany. Now my wife, a stickler for detail, has noticed that over the last 30 years, we have
accumulated many shades of artificial wood. This has become an irritant to her. Now she wants to paint the lot. It might work, but I can’t help but imagine painting my old Volvo to look like a 1960s VW bus, all canary yellow or avocado. To me, these are ugly colours. Likewise, it seems to me that the church is of late gaining all sorts of hues that unsettle me as well. Evangelicalism is changing dramatically and rapidly. In an effort not to make it too restrictive, and we do live in a most permissive age after all, evangelicalism has worked hard to relax the limits to its own identity. We have become convinced that propositions box you in and therefore must be avoided. The propositional boundaries that set us apart from the unbelieving world, whether or not that world was in the church, have been replaced by a nice chewy centre; the theory being that the soft core in the middle represents non-negotiable convictions binding evangelicalism (proponents would say freeing) allowing for porous borders that would allow for freer communion with those of other faiths and persuasions. The trick, of course lies in what you place in the centre and what you leave for the periphery. Given the premium we place on accommodation and pluralism, it should come as no surprise that centres tend to be the things we have the least trouble with.

Likewise, we evangelicals, children of consumerism and designer models, have, in large part, moved the heart of evangelicalism away from denominations and visible churches. This should come as no surprise. The bastions of modern evangelicalism never were churches or denominations. Its leaders were, of course, churchmen, but only after a fashion. Its symbolic leader, for many expressions of evangelicalism was Billy Graham, ostensibly a Southern Baptist, but shaped by the ministry of a lay Presbyterian, Henrietta Mears and directed toward the creation of a revivalist parachurch organization and a non-denominational seminary, Fuller. De-institutionalization gripped both sides of the Atlantic. While it was always intended by Francis Schaeffer to be an extension of the earlier International Presbyterian Church (IPC), the L’Abri Institute quickly gained its independence of that body, replicating centres all over Europe, even as the mother church, which I am hap-
The serious business of missions became the preserve of the parachurch. Witness the rapid rise and impressive influence manifest by the Navigators, IVP, Campus Crusade for Christ, YWAM, Operation Mobilization (OM), Pioneers, Frontiers, Wycliffe Bible Translators and scores of others. Now, don’t misunderstand me. I do not question the motives of any of these or of their manifold contributions. I simply wish to highlight two things. First, these became the centre, the heart as it were, of evangelicalism. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they became the leading edge of evangelical innovation and ministry. Vast sums were and are garnished for these organizations, raised by individuals and evangelical churches in order for their ministries to be accomplished. The point of course is that the money poured in because these were considered to be the spear point of evangelical ministry. Within the UK, the situation is somewhat different, largely owing I think to the stubborn Calvinism of Martin Lloyd-Jones. The general sad state of the church in the UK on one hand made non-denominational alliances attractive, but Lloyd-Jones, the BEA, and Banner of Truth Trust made the victory of fuzzy, broad evangelicalism far from a surety, even if the numbers were in its favour.

Western, and in particular, American evangelicalism continues spin away from foundational definitions and restrictions. We have now entered the era of the designer believer. If you think of the traditional church as a hymnal, think of the new ethos as an i-Pod. Much of this is the consequence of a tug-of-war for influence in the church waged between the theologians on one side and the sociologists and anthropologists on the other. The sociologists won. This meant fundamentally that matters of ecclesiology and any outward practice of the church are governed by what works best. Sociology has no other value system. It may have a vague awareness of the past, but it only values the present. It acknowledges no timeless standards. It would view any such notion, in fact, as an ar-
chaism, only worthy of a footnote somewhere. What matters now is what people think and what people want. Wade Clark Roof is a noted sociologist, writing extensively on evangelicalism in late 20th and early 21st century America. His observations and conclusions are well-worth noting.

“It’s a very interesting-and challenging idea: reinventing church. Theologians and Bible scholars are likely to be suspicious of the undertaking. The church is called to be the church they say, which is true of course, but that doesn’t quite satisfy sociologists who ask: “‘But what does that look like?’” Sociologically speaking, there is no church for all time.” He then goes on to address four “conversations” needed in order to decide what a church should be. The first is with religious tradition. What selective tradition should we follow for any given situation? He likens it to searching a toolkit for just the right tool for a given job. Religious toolkits include, for example, a diverse set of beliefs, stories, symbols, rituals, images, and worldviews. “Just as you select from the toolkit what tool you need to fix a particular mechanical problem, people of faith engage in a process of selective appropriation from our past, we reinterpret stories, beliefs, practices to fit the times in which they live.” It is, in this view, DIY Christianity. His second conversation involves the larger religious environment. What is going on with people and religions in general. Churches are dropping denominational labels, for example. What should your church do about that fact? The sociological approach would be to bring the church in line with contemporary trends. Post-modern Christianity is very much about catching waves not swimming against the tide. A third conversation involves the growth of religious pluralism in the West. The author sees it as an overall plus, but only if we accommodate, not confront. The fourth conversation considers the perceived postmodern split between religion and spirituality. We engage in this ourselves, don’t we. “Christianity is not a religion” we opine; “it is a relationship.” There is something right about this, but something missed as well. To the contemporary world, it means that Christianity as a privatized spirituality is OK, but church and Christianity are totalizing systems to be resisted or avoided.
Finally, Western evangelicalism has in large part embraced the ideal of accommodation. A survey by Roof of American Baby Boomers illustrates. When asked the following question: “Is it good to explore many different religious teachings and learn from them, or should one stick to a particular faith?”, 60% said they preferred to explore, including 51% of those identifying themselves as born again Christians. When asked whether they agreed with the statement: “All the religions of the world are equally true and good,” 48% agreed and 47% disagreed. More interestingly, 25% of the born again Christians agreed. In terms of absolute numbers, demographic surveys show that Protestantism has declined about five percent. Roman Catholicism, contrary to popular belief, has risen by the same amount. Additionally, religions other than Christianity now count for about eight percent of the population, three times what it was 50 years ago. Times they are a changin’. Regardless of what the religion, a Gallup survey revealed that over 80% of those polled believe that “one can be a good Christian or Jew without going to church or synagogue.” For our purposes, it is the evangelicals that interest. Brian McLaren, the popularizer of the Emergent Church says, “I don’t believe making disciples (which he thinks is a good thing) must equal making adherents to the Christian religion. It may be advisable in many (not all!) circumstances to help people become followers of Jesus and remain within their Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish contexts.” It sounds like the sociologists win again. Not finished, McLaren adds, “Ultimately, I hope that Jesus will save Buddhism (not just Buddhists), Islam and every other religion, including the Christian religion.” To make that happen, he states his willingness to become Buddhist, Muslim, (and one wonders, Christian?), in order to see people go to heaven. Why not? It is only a matter of donning a religion. If we go to the heart of evangelicalism, its core on both sides of the Atlantic, we may not like what we find.

Fortunately, there is more to say about God’s church. To be accurate, there is most to say, since most of the church exists outside of America and Europe. Perhaps it has escaped your notice (it cer-
tainly escaped mine for a very long time) that we are not, so to speak, the only show in town. It is
easy enough for us to think so. As citizens and residents of Europe, we have the old habit of looking
around, taking stock and assuming that all the world must look like Hounslow or Islington. Of
course, we know that it has to be more than that. The avalanche of immigration is enough to prove
that, but perhaps not in a way that makes us feel better about our prospects. Frank books like Lon-
donistan, government disclosure about grossly underestimated numbers of illegal immigrants and
asylum seekers hardly give us a sense that God’s promises in Malachi 1:11 are any closer to
fruition. We have empirical data. We can see with our own eyes that we are not winning. Every
Methodist or Anglican steeple with a crescent on it confirms the fact. This in turn generates action
on our part, some positive and some negative.

It does, at least I hope it does, drive us to prayer. Nothing we do could more please God. Nothing
ligns us better with his will and wisdom. On the other hand, circumstances such as these, as we per-
ceive them, generate fear. We can do the maths. We take stock of the large numbers of Muslims in
our society, particularly the militant Islamists, consider the current state of the church, factor in im-
migration and conversion and extrapolate fear. Perhaps we too will be like the Christians living on
the fringes of the Arabian desert after the death of Muhammad. We can see Islam coming, it is only
a matter of time until it dominates. In such a case, perhaps the best we can do is strengthen our de-
fenses before the onslaught begins. We bar the doors, stockpile the weapons and wait.

What mistakes we make because of what we do not know or fail to perceive. There is another
Church out there and it will soon swamp our own. It is the church of the Southern Hemisphere, for
want of a better name. It represents the vast and growing numbers of Asians, Africans, and South
Americans coming to proclaim the Lordship of Christ. We often hear about a militant, resurgent Is-
lam overtaking Christianity. Statistics do not bare this out. If present trends continue, by 2050, there
will be three billion Christians, outnumbering Muslims 3-2. If we take the fact that large numbers of reported Christians (an Muslims) are nominal, current statistics are also revealing. There are reportedly 560 million Christians in Europe and 260 million in North America, but there are also 480 million in South America, 360 million in Africa and 313 million in Asia. Additionally, unlike many of those found in Europe and America, most of the others are young in the faith, full of energy and evangelistic fervor.

They are not simply here, in rapidly growing numbers, they are also unhappy with us Western churches. Witness the growing disaffection within the Anglican communion between liberal Westerners and evangelical Southerners. Southern churches, ranging from Anglican to Pentecostal to Roman Catholic all seem to demonstrate greater reverence for the authority of Scripture, a more literalistic hermeneutic, more biblically-based morality, belief in the supernatural expressed through miracles, visions, healing and prophecy, and a respect for the authority of the Old Testament as equal to the New. The frustrated words of an African bishop to an American one: “If you don’t believe the scripture, why did you bring it to us in the first place?” should come as no surprise.

More importantly, the Southern Christians no longer feel compelled to follow the lead of Western religious leaders. They can feel their growing strength and do not mind asserting it. Lamin Sanneh well expresses the changing power centre of Christianity. He asks, “Whose reading-whose Christianity-is normal now? And whose will be in 50 years?”

As Jenkins notes, Southern churches have become truly indigenous. Now, let’s put this all together. We have a rapidly growing non-Western church that is also gaining confidence (Jenkins sees parallels of post-Constantinian European Christianity and Southern evangelicalism). It strongly believes that the church can and indeed must change the world. While we consider models such as the sojourner and pilgrim that deal with Christians surrounded by an
alien and hostile culture, Southerners are seeing things in starker, more political terms. In this sense, Christendom is only really dead as an idea in the West. As Southern Christianity grows, it theologizes. As it theologizes, it not only creates ideas and structures for its own use, it also evaluates ours. As it happens, we are often corporately found wanting. In some cases, this may be due to their syncretistic practices, in others it may be ours. The question of course is how should we position ourselves relative to these Southern Christians, both in terms of our entering their cultures and their entering ours? Is this

Given the realities confronting the Western church, who should we be and what should we do? Let’s start with our remit. As the body of Christ, we are self-evidently not our own. We were bought with a price and owe ourselves, our wills and our futures to the One who paid in full. As it happens, he has made known just what his desires are for his church and for his creation. We know for a fact that “from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts” (Mal 1:11). We know from this that it is God’s intention that peoples from all nations, Jew and Gentile will submit to the Triune God in worship. We know because the whole Bible is true that this will not be a “come as you are” party, but we shall be changed, transformed by the grace of God for an eternity of worship before the throne and the Lamb. We also know as we read the Bible as one covenantal promise that this process of supernatural, gracious change did not start with Jesus, though it certainly climaxes and culminates with him. It is the promise of Genesis 3:15 and of Abraham. It is for the sons of Jacob, the alien faith of Rahab and the offspring of Ruth. It is our promise too. We know the nature of the promise, that God will create and call a people for himself, and give them, as my old friend Henry Krabbendam always said, “new hearts, new records and new lives.” His words illustrate not only the way but the
means for the promise to be carried out. God is making a new heavens and a new earth and he is doing it by making us new people, resurrected people. We are transformed and as we are transformed, we tell the world how God in Christ transformed us and will transform them.

The Way it Ought to Be
So far, so good. But there is nothing new in this of course. What does this mean right now, right here? How should this promise be carried out in London, the UK, and Europe? What are we being called specifically to? Because we wonder and because we fear, we also want to know what provision is made for us. Are we called simply to our own devices with an even bigger burden than we thought we had? As we explore our options, I do wish to say, we indeed have provision for this new world. Yes, there are indeed imperatives, for us, urgent ones in fact, but there are also ample indicatives. God is still covenantally on his throne. There has always been provision for his people and that is a promise without expiry.

The key I believe is found within the biblical injunction to remember. Whenever God’s people got in over their collective head, they were directed to remember. They remember who they were and they remember who God was and what he did. This is Calvin’s call to the *duplex cognition dei*. It is as we reflect on, or to put it plainly, remember, God, we understand ourselves and *vice versa*. While sociology, like any other man-made tool has its uses, it is not equipped to shoulder this sort of burden. Remembrance, on the other hand is a provision flowing directly from the word of God. I would like to suggest that God has provided for our need in the church today by reminding us of a few things that may have been misplaced in our struggle to confront the present and future.

And how does he remind us? As always, God reminds us of what really matters by showing us his eternal, spirit-filled Word, but the good news for us is even better than that. For exam-
ple, when I learn, some things work better than others. I would like to say that I am a genius at taking correspondence courses. I would like to, but I can’t and I can’t because it isn’t true. Just showing me something, however compelling and well-explained, is not guaranteed to make me learn. Put me in a classroom with a good teacher and classmates, however, and I take off. It is hard to believe that I am the same person. As it happens, we do not learn alone. We are in fact surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses that help us learn (He 12:1). We have every saint that ever lived in the Old Testament and the New Testament to confirm to us what we should know. Better still, we also have every saint that has ever lived since sitting in the same classroom with us.

Do you get the point? The point you see is the church. We have the church and the church has us. We are the church but the church is more than me. This is big and you must not miss it. We have the church, not just churches, those often paltry things that sometimes remind us more of what divides than what unites. We have THE Church. We have the Body of Christ, the company of the redeemed, the chosen people of the covenant cutting through time til eternity. This is a truly significant other isn’t it? What does this mean? It means that we do not seek to address the issues of witness in 21st century London in isolation from our identity. We are Churchmen with a capital “C.” This is our identity. The postmodern world sees us as fragmented voices or autonomous voices, not a choir. Our admission of who we really are in Christ is essential to our response to the world in which we live. The fact is that whether or not we are Christians, our conditioned reflex is to address issues such as mission or ministry in dribs and drabs because that is how things are usually done. We need not and must not do this. Tchividjian points out, rightly I think, that “The church’s unwitting capitulation to powerful cultural forces has caused it to lose its prophetic other-worldly voice.” In other words, we are syncretists. Now, I need to be clear about this. Syncretists are not just New-Agers,
pluralists or liberals. Of course, they imbibe the spirit of the age. They, however, are not the only ones. I do believe that evangelicalism’s embrace of the parachurch with its privatized expressions, theological homogenization, and consumerist choice, all without the oversight of the visible church is very much in keeping with the times. In other words, at this point, to be counter-church is cultural and to be church is to be counter-cultural.

It is my conviction that the answers we need to the questions concerning how we meet the future of Southern churches, Islamist militancy and deconstructed secularism is found within our historic identity as the Church of Jesus Christ. This, of course, does not yet make the way plane for us. In what way does our identity as members of the body of Christ help us to know how to interact with Ugandan Pentecostals or Moroccan Salafists? What does being the church mean practically? Since a symptom of this age is designer religion, what is to prevent us from making up a church that gives us peace with this world and a good conscience, all without ever really going beyond our own opinions? Fortunately we have help. We have a home that has been ours ever since God constructed it and put us in it. It is a home that is not altogether other-worldly. It can be touched and seen and experienced as well. It has its problems but it is very much real.

This is the church as a historical reality. It is constructed by the Triune God, anchored in the gospel, nourished by the Word and the Spirit. The truth of it is affirmed by the apostles, defended by the blood of the early church, and rediscovered by the Reformers. In an age where we are our only gods, the church and all it has ever stood for puts the lie to all of our new fashionable creation myths and deals with the Devil. It holds the truth of the Bible up to us, not as a second source of revelation, but as a living witness to the truth of it throughout the ages. I asked earlier, “what church?” I would now like to answer my own question. My an-
swer consists of four characteristics and one model. None of these are new. All reflect the voice of the authentic church through time, even if that voice was often muffled or slurred.

First, the characteristics. I propose that we look seriously at and embrace the description of the church given to us in the Nicene Creed, finalized in 381 A.D. as a model for our post-modern, global church. Specifically, I do not mean adopting the entire creed as an official doctrinal standard for all of our churches. Though I am fine with that, my goals today are more limited. I simply propose that we evangelical churches centre our identity in four descriptors given by the Nicene Creed, namely that we be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. My second proviso, before launching into a description of each of the four is that we children of the Reformation filter the four through the prism of the Reformation. We live in a day where wide swaths of the evangelical world seems to be running away from any identification with the magisterial Reformation. The only bits tolerated any longer are those we used to say were part of the “Left-wing” of the Reformation. This, of course, included the Anabaptists, but it also included all manner of Unitarianism, Socinianism and the like. These expressions, as it were, have no link to the apostolic or historical church. They therefore have nothing to do with Nicea. The Reformers, on the other hand, were reforming the church, not inventing it. They were recovering the church. They saw themselves as legitimate children of the early church. They did not turn their back on it. Additionally, the Reformers are important because they extended the definitions found in the Nicene Creed. They reflected biblically on what the church meant when it said “one,” “holy,” “catholic,” and “apostolic.” It is my contention that their contributions are essential not peripheral to our proper understanding and acceptance of the four.

Finally, I wish to propose a model or paradigm for us to consider as a way of understanding
what our role in the world ought to be as we deal with the global church and the global challenge. The use of models of course has always been part of our understanding. The Bible itself is full of such ideas.


3 Wade Clark Roof, “Reinventing Church.”

4 Wade Clark Roof, “Today’s Spiritual Quests” 98.


6 McLaren 264.


9 Philip Jenkins, “Liberating Word.”