

Current Theological Trends: Grace Pastors' Fellowship, 4 November 2013

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1 Introduction

Mark Noll began his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), with the memorable phrase, "The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind." (p3). As we visit the subject of Current Theological Trends one might be forgiven for thinking that the current theological scandal is that, theologically, there are no really big scandals. Gone are the days, it would appear, when we fought battles along clearly-demarcated lines over such issues as the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture, the divinity of Christ, justification by faith – whatever one's perspective! - and the nature of the Church and her sacraments. Instead, many of our current imbroglios are over social issues such as homosexuality, come to the fore long after the theological horse bolted the ecclesial barn, and now fought on the grounds of discomfort and distaste.

When approaching the matter of current theological trends, one would do well to consider the response (attributed to former Chinese premier Chou En-lai) to the question of the significance of the French Revolution: "It's too early to say." This should remind us that what is current or trendy is not necessarily significant (witness Betamax VCR technology or 'Cross' footwear), what we term significant is not necessarily current, and what is edifying and useful to kingdom work is often neither. Even what is theological is subject to dispute; Reformed theologian RC Sproul defines theology as "the application of logic to God" (*Foundations: An Overview of Systematic Theology*, #1), while small-b baptist theologian James McClendon, Jr., defines it as struggle in the effort to understand God. This, to CW Freeman's thinking (CW Freeman, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation 'Twenty-Something," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 (2001), p21), is linked inseparably to the communities doing the struggling, which certainly makes theology somewhat relative, if not parochial. This itself is typical of a current trend in how Christians do theology, a new perspective not on Paul, but on the relationship of God and man.

But lest we qualify the question to death and end up looking at nothing, this paper will seek not so much to identify and introduce current shifts in academic theology as to give a brief summary of those subjects which are perceived to be of direct interest to the present life of the local church. To this end, I asked the General Coordinator to ask SGF pastors what topics they found to be of current theological interest, to which no responses were received – perhaps itself indicative of their busyness, if nothing else. Fortunately for the purposes of this paper, the FEBCC asked a similar question of its pastors a couple of years back, to which there were responses. These have helped to identify what local church pastors perceive as important theological questions. Their answers reflect what is being discussed in both church and society, in the press and on various blogs – perhaps an encouragement that theological dispute is not confined to the Church.

We will look at two categories of current theological controversy - what's hot and what's not – and attempt to establish what is at issue, why it is important, and list a few resources helpful in informing us on them.

2 What's Hot

In the aforementioned pre-National Convention survey of 2011, the FEBCC surveyed its pastors to see what theological topics they felt most required discussion and examination. We'll look at the top five, to which the 2012 regional FEB Central conference added eschatology and the New Perspective. There were dozens of other suggestions, but these five garnered about 30% of the almost 150 submissions; many others could have been lumped into concern about growth and church methodology, which is certainly a current hot topic in the FEBCC. Other less prevalent concerns, such as the historicity of Adam, divorce in the eldership, immorality, and sexual issues, can be considered to be amongst these top five.

One should probably also add to the list the subject of the Emergent Church. As the concerns this movement raises are as diverse as its theology is, scores of issues cited in the survey, such as postmodernism, the authority of preaching, and the sufficiency of the gospel are linked to the inroads this movement has made. It is somewhat refreshing to see that these concerns are not new, but have been the focus of ecclesiastic debate for centuries; perhaps their prominence, and the absence of other topics, is more instructive. One cannot ignore the concern expressed about Islam, though this is perhaps more of a societal concern, a clash of worldviews, than a theological matter, strictly speaking.

2.1 Homosexuality in Marriage and the Ministry: Sexual identity

I am certainly not ashamed to refer you to a presentation prepared by Dr. Stan Fowler of Heritage Theological Seminary for a workshop at the FEBCC National Convention in Toronto, November, 2012. In it, he outlines some of the concerns both theological and social related to this issue. It is perhaps far more vast and deep than it appears on the surface, which may explain the failure the Church has experienced in confronting it. The acceptance of homosexuality not only as an alternative but as a normal expression of human sexuality, and the consequent vilification of any opposition to this new normal, has roots in issues of Scriptural authority and sufficiency, biblical sexuality, Creation, and the understanding of the image of God in man, let alone that of the Bible's teaching on marriage and family.

This has been an area where vast parts of Christendom have long been in retreat. The issue has gained prominence most recently with the collapse in the United States of governmental defence of traditional marriage, with the associated effects this will have on all areas in which government legislates human affairs: business, education, health care, &c. What was prior to this year a tempest in a teapot is now an overflowing tub constantly filled by an ever increasing army of sorcerer's brooms. The collapse of what was a more or less traditional view of marriage – in reality, given the rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and cohabitation, the view of family, even heterosexual, ceased long ago to be recognisably traditional – has been even more rapid in the American republic than it was here. The rapidity of the collapse would seem to indicate that the theological and ideological rot had accomplished their work long before, it needing only a step in the wrong place to bring the whole edifice of traditional marriage and sexuality crashing down.

One senses that the matter is not primarily a biblical one, though it certainly is theological. It touches not only the innate depravity of man but his desire to redefine himself and his conduct outside of God's interference. While this is the overarching spiritual problem, the pressing issue is not particularly one of theological work yet to be done, the lines having been drawn long ago. Robert A Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) is reputed to be a solid resource on the Bible's teachings on the matter. A shorter summary of the hermeneutical issues at hand is found in Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1988), pp81-84, 167-173.

Some of the theological moves made by those whom Dr Fowler quite appropriately terms revisionists are perhaps somewhat foreign to our practice. One is to re-interpret the sin of Sodom (*Ge 19.1-29; Jude 6-7*) as inhospitality. While this is not excluded (*Ezk 16.49*), the sexual sin of Sodom is evidently the prime object of God's wrath. The situation of prohibitions against homosexuality in Old Testament laws that are inconsistently applied by Christians is also perceived to invalidate objections, these having been superseded by the ethos of the New Covenant (which is, apparently, far different from that of the Old, statements by the Apostle Paul notwithstanding). Objections to New Testament prohibitions and condemnations of homosexual activity (eg, *Ro 1.26-27; 1 Co 6.9-10*) are seen as dealing with those who are constitutionally heterosexual (a distinction the Bible does not recognise), not those naturally homosexual. Further, such

condemnations are said to be culturally conditioned, and not timeless principles. Perhaps more recognisable in Evangelical circles is the capstone of these objections, that the New Covenant is based on love, not law, and since homosexual relationships demonstrate love quite readily and promote the individual's happiness, they are valid.

These arguments may strike one as fatuous, but they carry a great deal of weight with many – especially where the objections to homosexuality have been hate-filled and inconsistent. However, they also necessitate a re-definition of love and the centring of the hermeneutical circle on the individual, not on God (*1 Jn 4.8, 10; Jn 3.16*). Like many of the current controversies, the theology behind it shares our day's infatuation with the individual, and his self-definition and fulfilment. One might be surprised as well to learn how normal is the toleration of and inability to perceive any wrongness in homosexual conduct beyond those of personal taste among our congregations – especially the young.

This subject remains of importance because of the rapidly shifting social perception of homosexuality and the acceptance and establishment both of its practice and its practitioners. It also shares with most other current disputes the matter of authority and the centre of one's hermeneutic. In pretty well all of our "trends," the questions of women's leadership, heaven and hell, even the Church and her sacraments, the debate is determined by where one situates God's authority vis-a-vis that of man.

The issue can no longer be defended in terms of traditional practice, as our society sees tradition as malleable and relative (thanks to our Protestant forebears?), and has little memory in any case. It does throw us back on that which we should never have left: God's purposes in Christ for creation, his design for men and women in marriage. It will require less of a reliance on natural theology – this is easily twisted – but on God's biblical revelation, with its attendant subordination to his purpose of all things in Christ (*Col 1.17; Eph 1.9-10; Ro 11.36*). This means, as in the other subjects on which we will touch, that we must step out of a conventionally comfortable place and go "outside the city," where Christ was crucified, not glorified. The Church's answer to the question of homosexuality will perhaps be more traumatic than other recent theological battles, for it almost certainly necessitates an actual, not just an internal, separation from mainstream social practice. There is no real point of equilibrium that will not require of the Church either total capitulation in practice as well as in proclamation or the drawing of a line in the sand beyond which we dare not venture.

This also means it is a battle we must be prepared to lose in the public square but win in the hearts of God's elect. It cannot be fought with words only, but in deed: with solid marriages for the raising of children, marriages that reflect and teach the Way of the Cross, beginning in the pulpit and reinforced in leadership. The matter of divorce, co-habitation, and general worldliness of outlook in the current Evangelical practice of marriage is the elephant in the room in matters of the family. The spirit of romanticism and self-realisation that have come to dominate our understanding and practice of the institution (as long as between a man and a woman, one union at a time) make it very difficult to mount a credible defence of biblical marriage and a sound debunking of homosexual "marriage" that can convince our own people, let alone opponents of the gospel. Our theology is the emperor of concept devoid of the clothing of practice, and those around us have rightly called us out on it. Our desire for relevance, our spiritualisation of the gospel which separates it from actual physical sacrifice and obedience, its fine fit with what many others believe anyway, have stoppered our ears to the little boy's observation of our nakedness.

Any possible defence of a biblical sexuality will also require a coherent and comprehensive theological response from the Church in terms of our understanding of Creation, of the appointed roles of man and woman in that Creation and in God's redemptive purpose, and the address of the Cross to our whole life.

The response of many former United Church adherents who fled that organisation in the 1980s over the ordination of homosexuals after having remained as the Bible and the Cross were long before ushered out the door, will not be sufficient. As social acceptance of homosexuality is so widespread, especially among the young, any recourse to the 'ick' factor is certain to fail, and deservedly so. Our understanding of homosexuality must find its roots in Creation and the Cross, and its expression in biblical, Christ-displaying marriage.

2.2 The Role of Women

Not disconnected from the politics of sexual identity is the ongoing discussion of the role of women. This, again, is a field in which we've won the battle but are losing the war. Having ruled women out of the pulpit, we seem to have ensured that they are merely finding other churches in which to exercise their gifts. Even in the official resolution of the matter in the FEBCC, one senses that the discussion has only gone underground, with voting no longer done on the convention floor but with church members' feet.

Though supposedly resolved several years ago in the FEBCC after considerable debate, realistically the issue is not going away – a church is never isolated from the community it serves and from which it draws its converts and most of its thinking. A rigorous defence of our practice of complementary leadership in our churches needs to be presented and practised. While few of our churches would have women deacons, let alone elders or pastors, where is their real power base and manpower? Religion, even amongst Evangelicals, seems increasingly to be perceived as a feminine pursuit. Re-naming our pastors "coaches" is not going to solve the problem; neither is appealing to some sort of "team spirit" amongst our men. This allows us to isolate maleness from its spiritual and domestic exercise, which Scripture certainly does not.

A biblical pattern of male-female relations must also be reflected in our homes; it cannot merely draw on a couple of Bible verses, however iron-clad a case this might make for many. We need show our practice to be consistent not only with the letter of the Bible, but with the spirit and practice of the Lord and the apostles. It must also be shown to be what is right for a society desperately in need of a solid, biblical role model. Haddon Robinson's dictum, "It's in the Bible because it's right," needs to be our guide, here. Complementary leadership is not only biblically faithful, it is right for our Church and our society. So this shouldn't be a dead issue; but it is one too important to be addressed merely by refutation via a few texts. Rather, the biblical role of women and of men needs to be addressed together, and then lived out. When the apostles deal with this (*Eph 5.18-33; Col 3.16-4.1; 1 Pe 2.18-3.9*), they do so in the context of life in Christ lived out by those of all conditions of life. Differences in the sexes and their roles is seen as consistent with, and not a contradiction of, who we are as at once fallen creatures and regenerate in Christ (*Gal 3.26-29*) in a kind of seamless garment.

This again is a matter in which further work needs to be done beyond circling the wagons in a defensive orb of ever decreasing radius. The complementarian view is rapidly becoming a minority report, and will be unsustainable if not rooted solidly not only in biblical texts, but in the life of Christ as lived out in his community. Like opposition to the acceptance of homosexual practice, it will wither on the vine if that vine is not nourished with both biblical obedience and rooted in the whole of biblical revelation, especially as it points to Christ.

Some references that may be of use (again, from the presentation of Drs Fowler and Barker) on this issue are: Gundry, Stan, Beck, James, Eds., *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), and Kostenberger, Andreas, Schreiner, Thomas, Eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). The website for the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, www.cbmw.org, is also informative.

2.3 Heaven and Hell

Little has been heard of hell on a serious theological level since John Stott's rather ambiguous statements in the 1990s. However, in popular culture the universal and generic nature of heaven has never gone away, the prayers of the new atheists notwithstanding, and the receding of hell from the scene has not ceased. There has even recently been renewed interest in 'heaven', if none in hell, in popular discourse. Perhaps thought of as having receded in the rear-view mirror of popular culture with such classics as "Touched By An Angel" and Shirley Maclaine's *Dancing In The Light*, there has been a renewed interest in some form of celestial heaven beyond that susceptible to being realised by human evolution or social progress. That testimonies have been coming from those with a scientific background may give the trend more staying power than previous dalliances with thoughts of eternity. A well-balanced article in *Macleans* magazine on this topic (Brian Bethune, "The Heaven Boom," *Macleans*, 13 May 2013, pp44-48) illustrates how the current popularity of eternal matters, if perhaps not heaven, is ignored at our peril

Concerns about heaven and hell have been bolstered by popular preachers such as Rob Bell. It's not often that books by pastors about eternal matters make best-seller lists. But his rather ambitiously entitled *Love Wins* (R Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011)) has much to recommend it. It quite rightly gives a depth and immediacy to both heaven and hell that elevate the significance of both. His argument is unfortunately plagued by its address to a straw-man and almost bullet-point form presentation; opposing views are characterised oversimplistically, and their adherents derided as troglodytes. As well, this is nestled in a very disturbing reduction of God to our level and an associated exaltation of man's freedom, as well as the redefinition of love, a rather typical move for the genre. God is brought down to size, to accommodate himself to us and to be understood as we are. The Cross itself, as usual in such efforts, is re-interpreted or neglected.

More disturbing, however, is the resonance this has in the pews. This theology, rather a Barth-light devoid of his nuance, depth of argument, and solid engagement with past authorities, is reflected in our new hymns and pew-level discussion, if not yet from orthodox pulpits. It may well be what people really believe, despite Bell's dismissal of his opponents as rubes. Many of our people would not openly concur with his arguments, but one suspects that they do not really believe orthodox teaching about hell either, and for our part we are just as glad not to foist it on them. Such a doctrine, in our modern era, has become incredible.

But at least heaven and hell have been brought back into play, even if by those whose views are unbiblical. It gives us licence, if any were needed, to preach heaven and hell as the realities they are, and to relate these to everyday life – more importantly, to relate them to the life and death of Christ. It means that we do have an audience at least aware of eternal issues. Preaching a temporal gospel of self-realisation and material and emotional prosperity may not be what our hearers come for. However, we must do our homework, for the narrative now being presented is compelling and dangerous. In being compelling, however, it does indicate encouragement – if only from the world - for the Church to preach what we've been commissioned to preach: eternal life in Christ Jesus, eternal punishment in recourse to any life outside of him. The *Macleans* article indicates how far reaching is belief in some form of continuation of consciousness. Plain old materialism, which looked to be sweeping the field in terms of understanding consciousness as being rigidly linked to the material organ that is the brain, is not ageing well; it doesn't seem to be keeping with what science is discovering about the seat of consciousness. This is hardly revival, but should enable us to preach the gospel in a form that will resonate with a post-modern understanding of consciousness.

On the matter of hell, *Love Wins* is worth reading, if only to understand what passes for popular theological

thought about this matter. More useful are works such as *Whatever Happened to Hell* (J Blanchard, Wheaton: Crossway, 1995) and *Four Views of Hell* (W Crockett, Ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

2.4 Creation Issues

Creation continues to be a hot topic, at least in arguments internal to the Church. One senses, despite arguments to the contrary and the few examples put forth in rebuttal, that those outside the Church consider that matter of origins as rather a closed book, save for some niggling details. It does remain crucial for us to present a robust and Christ-centred, biblical account of cosmic and human origins. One need only peruse the Scriptures in a cursory manner to see how prevalent references to creation are. The account is foundational not only to understanding our origins, but more importantly and perhaps more susceptible to being lost in the argument, to understanding who God is. He is intimately connected with his creation, over and in it but not of it, and must be so if he is to be our Redeemer in Jesus Christ, in whom he consciously chose to come unto his own as one of us. Indeed, this connection of creation and redemption in Christ is what is crucial to refuting the current pantheistic and pagan views of God prevalent in society and in the Church.

At the same time, the internecine warfare over creation seems to generate far more heat than light, and has produced a number of what must be considered 'friendly-fire' victims. In examining what are perhaps the most prevalent interpretations of the Bible's teachings on creation, we might wish to ask ourselves why there is such venom in the defence of one's own view, and such vehement denunciation of any opponents. Is it simply because of the crucial nature of the subject, or is there a fear underlying our defence of our preferred view? What sort of difference can be said to be within the permissible bounds of orthodoxy?

In his "Cursory Reflections on Reading the Creation Account" presented at the 2012 FEB Central Regional Conference, Dr David Barker did an admirable job in summarising some of the current views of creation, and a courageous one, given the hostile reaction to variance on this matter. In a manner far more succinct than this author could muster, he categorises current views on creation as follows:

- i) Young Earth Creationism: recent event according to a literal reading of the text, with all basic organisms created during the six-day creation week.
- ii) Old Earth Creationism (progressive): combination of supernatural intervention and providential guidance to construct, over a very long time, the cosmos.
- iii) Functional vs. Material Origin ('Cosmic Temple'): the seven days as inaugurating the cosmos as a functioning temple where God takes up his residence to rule.
- iv) Theistic Evolution: in which creation is fully gifted to organise and transform itself.

In Barker's discussion, he gives strong and weak points of each view, even as other variants, such as the 'Gap' theory, day-age, and literary reading are not addressed (he does so elsewhere). A few references he gives on the subject of the creation account are:

Paul Nelson et al., *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).
John H Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, (Grand Rapids: IVP, 2009).
Bruce K Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

For those of a more visual bent, links to Dr Albert Mohler's exploration of the 'young-earth' understanding of creation, particularly as regards the appearance of age, and a rebuttal of this, are below:

<http://www.credomag.com/2013/06/25/why-does-the-universe-look-so-old-albert-mohler/>
<http://theaquilareport.com/al-mohlers-literal-six-day-young-earth-creationism-and-the-state-of-the-question/>

As our understanding of God's creative work must be formed by the Scripture, the following by Noel Weeks on understanding ancient texts – of which the Bible is one – are useful:

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/background-in-biblical-interpretation-part-1.php>

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/background-in-biblical-interpretation-part-2.php>

2.5 Baptism and Church membership

This subject was also the object of concern for a significant number of FEBCC pastors in the aforementioned survey. Certainly, the linking of membership to proper baptism is clear enough in FEBCC faith and practice; there have been recent examples of churches being censured for failure to adhere to this order. The precise concern those pastors had who submitted this area for discussion is not known.

The significance of church membership and its relation to access to the Lord's Table and to service in the ministry of the church has always been left to the discretion of individual churches and never really been well-defined at a higher level. The connection between access to the Lord's Table, baptism, and membership, once the subject of heated discussion and even division - if one can imagine - amongst Baptists both Calvinistic and General, now seems of little particular interest. On disputes regarding this matter in earlier Calvinistic Baptist churches, one may consult RW Oliver, *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists: 1771-1892* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 2006). A motion introduced at National Convention 2011 to disconnect access to the Table from baptism, a relationship clearly understood while not theologically developed in the current Affirmation of Faith, was quietly dropped the following year when a number of pastors objected on biblical and theological grounds. That this was dropped without discussion, and that there was surprise that this might be a controversial change, is somewhat troubling, a theological trend in itself. Interestingly enough, in Southern Baptist Convention's *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, baptism is clearly linked to access to the Lord's Table through the church, an older interpretation of the two sacraments: "Being a church ordinance, it is prerequisite to the privileges of church membership and to the Lord's Supper." On this, see P Gentry on BFM 2000, Art 7b, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=14088>.

What certainly cannot be denied is that we are not doing a particularly good job of linking baptism, membership, the Lord's Table, and the life of the community to the sanctifying work of the crucified Lord in his Church. As Art 30.7 of the 1689 Confession affirms, "Those...receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and receive all the benefits accruing from his death." That our discussions about baptism and the Table typically focus on mode and recipient, even on what is *not* happening through each, without particular attention to the place of the sacraments – however one perceives them to function – in the Lord's work of salvation cannot be detached from the cafeteria mentality with which many now approach the Church and her ordinances.

2.6 The Emergent Church

This topic certainly flows from what precedes, for ecclesiology and sacramental theology figure prominently in popular and academic discussion about the role of the community in doing theology, even in how Christ saves. Unfortunately, the Emergent Church has become so broad, and its theology, while challenging, so diverse and lacking in particulars, that it is more of a flavour than a movement. Bell's book perhaps indicates well where its theology is going. What the Emergent Church movement has accomplished, and in this it is not entirely removed from discussions in academic circles typified by the Re-visioning the Baptist Identity Manifesto (CW Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology Be Re-visioned?," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24 (1997): pp273-310), which seeks to address the direction the Baptist movement should take in the late or post-modern Western world, is to define the work of the church and the efficacy of the

sacraments in terms beyond the individual, while trying to avoid the magical. Baptism, the Lord's Table, the church herself, are seen as lived-out activities in community. In this approach there is a good deal of merit, though it is unfortunately very susceptible to being disconnected from the rule of Christ in the church and his objective power and presence, and is potentially as susceptible to being blinded by the spirit of our age as it would find our forebears to have been by theirs. For a rebuttal of the basis of the Manifesto, see S Bryant, "An Early English Baptist Response to the Baptist Manifesto," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38 (2011): pp237-248. A couple of books one might wish to consult on the the Emergent church movement are (pro) B McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) and (con) D Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

As with much of what we have been examining, whether we agree or not with the correctness of the views, this particular approach resounds with current sentiment within and without the Church. Consequently, we do well to examine before dismissing what is being said and done, and then to respond properly, with a robust Christ-centred soteriology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology, and life.

2.7 Other

To the above, we might add those topics making the rounds of at least a few of the theological journals. There continues to be back and forth on the subject of justification and the New Perspective. For a brief summary of some of the issues involved in the New Perspective for those unfamiliar with the dispute, one may read J Allman, "Perspective on the New Perspective," *Biblioteca Sacra* 170 (Jan-Mar 2013): 51-68. For salvoes from both sides of the ongoing battle, Thomas Schreiner, "Justification: The Saving Righteousness of God in Christ," *JETS* 54.1 (Mar 2011): 19-34 and NT Wright, "Justification: Yesterday, Today, and Forever," *JETS* 54.1 (Mar 2011): 49-63.

One might well add the that the ongoing Reformed culture wars, the "young, restless, and reformed" movement and its detractors, generate a good deal of heat. However, while this has important things to say regarding the manner in which the confessing Church brings the ancient faith to a modern culture, it seems unlikely to produce much beyond more separation, which is perhaps the last thing we need at present among those holding and preaching a Reformed, Christ-centred faith. As well, the recent "Strange Fire" conference seems to indicate an on-going concern about the charismatic movement, though this has not been perceived to be a big issue in recent years.

3 What's Not

It is perhaps just as instructive to look at what is not a current theological trend; what is not on the radar, but perhaps should be. Like generals, theologians can be guilty of fighting the past war – are there any areas that deserve greater attention?

3.1 Demographic Collapse

While the aforementioned subjects certainly deserve our attention, we do risk solving them only to pronounce our brilliant exposition to empty chairs. Like Dr. Cuticle of Melville's *White Jacket*, we may perform brilliant surgery only to have appalled on-lookers notice that the patient had died long before (from E Petersen, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p107). Once the over-studied problem of a much-derided liberal Church, the empty pew is now also afflicting Evangelical churches, it would appear. Baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention have declined alarmingly in recent years, according to Thomas Reiner, <http://thomrainer.com/2013/06/08/where-have-all-the-baptisms-gone/>. A just released survey of FEB Central churches would reinforce these findings. The growth of churches in some areas seems to be primarily at the expense of other less trendy Evangelical works.

But what is primarily of concern, a reflection of current issues in biblical sexuality, is the disappearance of our children. Not only are we having fewer children, but the retention rate of our youth in Evangelical churches seems little better than the retention rate of our spouses. While mere numbers can be deceiving, as a recent Focus on the Family study opined (<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=41364>), given that many leaving were not converted in the first place and need yet to be saved, it cannot be denied that we are doing a poor job of retaining our youth. If children are indeed a blessing from the Lord, we might re-consider how he views our current state. A recent study by the EFC, *Hemorrhaging Faith*, examines the numbers in Canada. The loss of the majority of our youth (60%-70%) to the Church by the time they reach college age is attributed in this work, which I have not yet read, to a perception of hypocrisy, judgementalism, and exclusivism in the church by those leaving. There may or may not be truth to this; however, we seem mainly to be dealing with the matter at present by seeking better programming, presentation, and allocation of resources, rather than examining what exactly is being preached. Even the discipleship model, while better than trying to convince young people to let Jesus fulfil their dreams, leaves open the matter of whom they are following, and what it is that he – and he alone - has done. Are our children being introduced to the Saviour and his Cross – *Sirs, we would see Jesus?* Is he only to be copied, or is there something he alone objectively provides, as the Son of God, for the believer? Another text on this subject, which I've not yet managed to read, is D Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

3.2 The Impossibility of Faith

Perhaps what may tie much of what we've looked at together is couched in the midst of an address on religious liberty by Dr Albert Mohler, Jr., to, of all people, the Mormons at Brigham Young University: the increasing "impossibility" of faith. While it is evident from Scripture that without the Spirit's work we cannot believe (*Ezke 36.26; Ac 11.18; 1 Co 1.30; 2.8-10; 1 Pe 1.3*), Mohler is referring to the sheer incongruity of biblical faith in a late modern age technological society. Where once it was impossible not to believe, then in Enlightenment times it became possible not to do so, in our era it is nigh on impossible to believe. Whether we like it or not, the faith must be preached in the context of whatever contemporary age the Church finds herself in. Our age is one that is not only hostile to faith, but to which it is foreign. Superstitious and spiritual, belief in an external norm strikes many now as absurd. This presents tremendous difficulty in passing on the faith once delivered to the saints, and particularly influences the place of the Church and her ordinances in "spirituality." The aforementioned theological subjects all touch in some sense on the matter of authority – as did the Reformation itself. When the ideological climate is such that any authority beyond the individual is suspect, we face tremendous difficulties. This is seen in the general decline in religious affiliation, even in the United States, heretofore exceptional in the West in this.

The link to Mohler's address is: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2013/10/21/a-clear-and-present-danger-religious-liberty-marriage-and-the-family-in-the-late-modern-age-an-address-at-brigham-young-university/>. In the course of the speech, he refers to a tome that appears quite germane, C Taylor's *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

3.3 The Bishop of Rome

There was a saying in the trenches during the First World War: You never hear the one that gets you. While this should lead us in the realm of theology to be very wary of what we're not talking about, this last blind spot has the chance to do a great deal of harm. Thinking perhaps that we have the issue nailed down dead-to-rights theologically, we perhaps ignore the goings on in the Roman Catholic church. The Reformers certainly did not, and were far from consigning the whole lot to perdition and the pope with them, unworthy of concern because their faith wasn't "personal." Their objections were far more

thoroughly and seriously thought out than ours often are today.

The current incumbent to the See of Peter, Pope Francis, has been notable for the bombshells he's let go in public recently. At first glance, he would appear to be a thoroughly modern Millie, casting off a bunch of old dogmas and embracing the social gospel that every right-thinking person thinks is the heart of the Christian message. Why do we need to think and talk about this? First, the man doesn't speak through his hat – popes are not elected because they're stupid, or theological dabblers. He certainly gives away nothing of Catholic dogma, while seeming to conform quite nicely in ways to what everyone's thinking anyhow. Secondly, the Bishop of Rome has an audience the best TV preachers could only dream of. His words have great import because they are heard far and wide. His Church is catholic in a way Protestantism has failed to be, and to a degree to which our believing churches don't aspire. Thirdly, this pope has a great popular appeal. While his predecessor could charitably be described as having "a great face for radio," this pope is far warmer and charismatic – like John Paul II. Drawing his name from a church figure that both Protestants and Roman Catholics lay claim to, he is perhaps what that institution needs if its to hold the line in the West while continuing to grow in the South and East. And while the money and the power may currently be in the First World, the future is in the two-thirds world, from whence Francis hails. It is there that the population is growing, and where faith remains "possible." It is also where Catholicism must fight Islam and Pentecostalism.

We would do well to listen closely to Pope Francis's pronouncements. What is correct and useful in what he's saying? – there is rather more than we might think, especially in the way it is worded. What is in error? – it may be more subtle than we think. What do our people need to hear to be properly informed? - they may be listening and sympathising to a greater degree than we imagine. A charismatic figure with an organisation that has a pedigree, deep roots in the psyche of many – even if denied - and deep pockets, is a threat to the free spread and practice of the gospel. If we neglect to listen to the man, we can be sure that those around us are, to some extent. The Bishop of Rome remains the de facto face of Christianity for the world, so we need to examine closely his pronouncements.

A couple of links to recent statements by and about Pope Francis are:

<http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/09/24/the-pope-is-the-pope-and-the-rest-of-you-are-not/>: The National Post's religion column's sympathetic take.

<http://www.bpnews.net/BPFirstPerson.asp?ID=41206>: Comment by Russell Moore (President, Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, SBC) on the pope's recent public pronouncements.

<http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2013/09/francis-our-jesuit-pope>: An excellent Roman Catholic theologian (RR Reno) on the pope's opening forays.

<http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>: This latter, from *America* magazine, the magazine of the Jesuits. A Jesuit (the first) pope being interviewed by and for his own.

4 Conclusion

Well, if there's not much of an Evangelical mind, there is at least much for Evangelicals to mind! Our current theological trends may be less narrowly theological than philosophical, less academic than practical, but they are nonetheless present opportunities to present the crucified and risen Lord and his Kingdom in a very challenging field. The white on the harvest fields may appear to be killing ice not a waiting crop – but to the Lord of the Church, they are still his fields, we are his servants, and loving and serving him with heart, mind, soul, and strength, may we represent Christ in our day in these areas as well as our fathers did in theirs.