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Evangelical Christianity and the Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue

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EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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PRECIS

In this essay, the author, an evangelical Christian, seeks to analyze the arguments for and against evangelical participation in interreligious dialogue. He finds that, while the arguments against evangelical participation in dialogue suggest some important boundaries for dialogue, they do not completely militate against it. Conversely, the arguments for dialogue form a persuasive case for evangelical participation.

I. Introduction: The Evangelical Quandary

Evangelical Christianity[1] is a movement that is in tension. Evangelicals constantly struggle with opposing forces in the challenge to seek doctrinal purity: the impulse to thwart apostasy by avoiding exposure to heterodox doctrine, alongside the need to be broad-minded in order to avoid hasty conclusions on difficult doctrinal decisions. The current movement toward dialogue among the world's religions finds many within evangelicalism wanting to benefit from the insights of dialogue[2], yet uncertain whether they can do so without compromising key aspects of their identity. The appeal of

[1]It is difficult to define a movement as broad and disparate as evangelical Christianity. Gabriel Fackre has identified Evangelicals as those Christians who have "espoused and experienced justification and scriptural authority in an intensified way: personal conversion and a rigorous moral life, on the one hand, and concentrated attention on the Bible as a guide to conviction and behavior on the other, with a special zeal for the dissemination of Christian faith so conceived (evangelism)" (Gabriel Fackre, "Evangelical, Evangelicalism," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds., *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* [London: SCM Press, 1983], p. 191). Although personal conversion is undoubtedly the *sine qua non* of evangelicalism, other important traits, such as a high view of the Bible and an emphasis on fulfilling the Christian mission (as variously conceived), contribute to the "family resemblance" that enables evangelicalism to be viewed collectively as a movement.

[2]Some Evangelicals have engaged in interreligious dialogue, but I think it is safe to say that most evangelical laity and many of the leaders of evangelicalism would view such an endeavor with suspicion (see Harold Netland, "Application: Mission in a Pluralistic World," in Edward Rommen and Harold Netland, eds., *Christianity and the Religions* [Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995], p. 265). For examples of evangelical engagement in dialogue, see A. James Rudin and Marvin R.Wilson, eds., *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987); and Basil Meeking and John Stott, eds., *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977-1984: A Report* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B.

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interreligious dialogue is undeniable, but the question of whether Evangelicals can benefit from such dialogue, while still honoring the evangelical interpretation of the Christian message, demands an answer.

This essay will investigate the compelling reasons that have led to the growth of interreligious dialogue and the arguments for and against evangelical participation therein. These arguments will be of two types: those that would be persuasive to Evangelicals because of the obvious rationality of the arguments, and those that would be persuasive to Evangelicals because of the high status they give to the Christian Bible.[3]

II. The Philosophy of Interreligious Dialogue

Dialogue is a communicative and investigative process engaged in by two or more persons (or communities) with differing beliefs,[4] wherein each attempts to gain an increased understanding of the other's beliefs and the reasons for those beliefs. The primary goal in dialogue should be understanding the other, rather than expressing one's self, though self-expression is obviously also essential to dialogue. The benefits of dialogue are many; among the most obvious are increased self-understanding, improved understanding of others, better relations with others, and broad-based ideological research. Dialogue between equal parties should be beneficial to all involved.

It is *not* essential to dialogue for one to give up belief in the truth of one's own system. It *is* essential for one to give up the view that one has a "corner on the truth," if one holds such a view. One must be open to the possibility that some of one's beliefs are in error and that the beliefs of the dialogue partner may be correct—or at least more correct than one's own. As Leonard Swidler has observed:

> Religions and ideologies describe and prescribe for the whole of life; they are holistic, all-encompassing, and therefore tend to blot out, that is, either

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Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986). For examples of evangelical thinkers who support participation in interreligious dialogue, see David K. Clark, "Can Apologists Enter Genuine Dialogue?" in *Proceedings of the Wheaton Theology Conference* 1 (Spring, 1992): 152-162; and Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), pp. 129-147. For an example of a leading Evangelical who opposes interreligious dialogue, see John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994). A much more nuanced critique by an evangelical thinker is cached within Gerald H. Anderson's (ultimately pro-dialogue) article, "Speaking the Truth in Love: An Evangelical Response," in Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler, eds., *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, Religions in Dialogue 4 (Lewiston, NY; Queenston, ON; Lampeter, U.K.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), pp. 162-173.

[3]The author of this essay considers himself an evangelical Christian and has studied at evangelical schools ranging from conservative to outright fundamentalist. He has also studied at nonreligious schools and is currently a Ph.D. student in philosophy and religion at Temple University in Philadelphia. The question of interreligious dialogue is important to him because in his academic, philosophical, and theological pursuits he has repeatedly found that he is challenged most by those with whom he has the least in common ideologically.

[4]Dialogue may primarily concern either practices or beliefs, but most often beliefs and practices are so closely interrelated that the single term "beliefs" can be used to signify both.

> convert or condemn, outsiders even more than other institutions that are not holistic. Thus, the need for modesty in truth claims and for acknowledging complementarity of particular views of the truth is most intense in the field of religion.[5]

Recent developments in epistemology virtually necessitate surrender of the traditional attitude of dogmatic certainty with which religions have regarded their doctrinal formulations. The certainty that was a result of foundationalist epistemic strategies has, following the apparent failure of foundationalism,[6] become much more tentative. Postmodern epistemology is "perspectival": it recognizes that all beliefs reflect the knower as much as the known. What one believes is influenced by one's culture, background, needs, and perhaps even one's genetic make-up and the ideological framework and constraints of one's native language. Dialogue can help one to step outside of one's own perspectival situation and see one's beliefs from another's perspective.

Furthermore, considerable doubt has been cast upon the possibility of attaining the Western ideal of rational objectivity. Edmund Husserl reversed the usual way of thinking about objectivity when he pointed out that the only things one can know for certain are subjective.[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer argued persuasively that all understanding is historical[8] and that all knowledge involves interpretation.[9] Thomas Kuhn showed that beliefs are not a direct result of objective evidence but, rather, involve complex systems of presuppositions that change only reluctantly and in the face of nearly overwhelming evidence.[10] The upshot of these and other insights is that a person's beliefs are seen to be not nearly as objective as was formerly thought. Dialogue is exactly what is needed to probe and test one's own beliefs further. Through dialogue we can gain additional perspectives on our own beliefs and learn to contrast our beliefs with alternative belief-systems. In this way dialogue can help thinkers gain a greater degree of objectivity toward their own beliefs.

At the same time, dialogue may be the only recourse by means of which a person can avoid absolute relativism. The arguments that demonstrate the perspectival nature of human knowledge have been used by some to argue for the completely inscrutable and inveterate nature of the beliefs of each individual. They argue that the unique situation and background of each person

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[5]Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 21.

[6]Attempts to reformulate foundationalism along fallibilist lines also lead to regarding conclusions as only tentatively true.

[7]Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, tr. Dorion Cairns (Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publications, 1993), pp. 1-25.

[8]In the chapter, "The Elevation of the Historicality of Understanding to the Status of Hermeneutical Principle," in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward; New York: Seabury Press, 1975; 2nd ed., 1979; orig.: *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2nd ed. [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1965]), Second Part, Sect. II, Chap. 1, pp. 235-274.

[9]In the chapter, "Analysis of Effective-Historical Consciousness," in ibid., Second Part, Sect. II, Chap. 3, pp. 305-341.

[10]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

renders the beliefs of each unique; therefore, none can truly know what another believes or has experienced. Jürgen Habermas and others have used the fact of dialogue to turn this argument on its head. Habermas has argued that, because through dialogue one can come to understand another's beliefs and experiences, it is evident that all humans share certain universal essences and experiences.[11]

Also relevant to the philosophy of dialogue is the recent growth in popularity of "coherence" theories of truth. While the most common theory of truth in the West, the correspondence theory, holds that a statement is true if it (in some way) corresponds to reality, the coherence theory holds that a statement is true if it coheres with the other things that are taken to be true. Dialogue provides a way to test the truth of alternative theses by allowing the participants the opportunity to test their "fit" within each participant's thought-system.[12]

It is the increasing "globalization" of the human world that has, more than any other single factor, brought about these developments in philosophy. It is also globalization and the "incontrovertible fact of religious pluralism"[13] that has necessitated many instances of dialogue; whereas in the past disparate ideologies were geographically buffered from confrontation with each other, in today's world people ascribing to diverse ideologies find themselves as neighbors, literally or electronically. Dialogue has become a real necessity in order to be able to coexist peacefully and to cooperate effectively in areas of shared economic and political interest.

The fact of pluralism and the awareness of the deabsolutized nature of human knowledge demand that persons (or communities) with differing beliefs attempt to gain an increased understanding of each others' beliefs and the reasons for those beliefs through dialogue. Effective interreligious and interideological dialogue offers benefits to all involved, benefits that in some instances cannot be achieved in any other way.

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[11]Habermas called this "universal pragmatics." See Jürgen Habermas, "Some Distinctions in Universal Pragmatics: A Working Paper," tr. Pieter Pekelharing and Cornelis Disco, *Theory and Society*, vol. 3 (1976), pp. 155-167; and idem, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, tr. Frederick Lawrence, Studies in Contemporary German Thought (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987; orig.: *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* [Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985], esp. Lecture XI, "An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centered Reason," pp. 294-326.

[12]Paul Knitter has advocated this approach: ". . . what is true will reveal itself mainly by its ability to *relate* to other expressions of truth and to *grow* through these relationships – truth defined not by exclusion but by relation. The new model reflects what our pluralistic world is discovering: no truth can stand alone; no truth can be totally unchangeable. Truth, by its very nature, needs other truth. If it cannot relate, its quality of truth must be open to question" (Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions*, American Society of Missiology Series 7 [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985], p. 219; emphasis in original).

[13]Norman E. Thomas, "The Witness-Dialogue Dialectic," in Mojzes and Swidler, *Christian Mission*, p. 225.

III. Philosophical Arguments from an Evangelical Perspective

Christian Evangelicals, like the members of most religious sects, believe that the tenets of their religion are uniquely true. Logically, this entails that they will believe that some tenets of other religions are false.[14] Typically, Evangelicals have had an absolutist attitude toward the truth of their tenets and the falsehood of the tenets of other religions, although this attitude is incidental rather than logically necessary.

While the average evangelical Christian is probably unaware of the philosophical developments that have led to the widespread acceptance of perspectival and deabsolutized views of human knowledge, philosophically sophisticated Evangelicals are aware of these developments[15] and their implications for interreligious dialogue.[16] "Average" evangelical Christians are aware of religious pluralism. In the workplace, at school, and in other everyday activities they meet and interact with people who espouse other ideologies. Sometimes the parties feel that it is better not to discuss their differences, while at other times ideological differences do become the topic of discussion.

There are three possible ways for persons who hold different views to handle their differences: silence, dialogue, or conflict. The potential benefits of dialogue are apparent to the evangelical scholar and "lay" person alike, but the question of whether dialogue is a live option for Evangelicals is controversial. The arguments for and against evangelical participation in dialogue must be weighed before a conclusion can be reached on this issue.

A. Arguments Favoring Dialogue

1. The Quest for True Beliefs

Evangelicals are concerned about the truth of their beliefs. They believe that one of the reasons God provided the Bible was to give a reliable source for true beliefs. However, the Bible is of no value as an uninterpreted book. In order for any book to be a source of doctrine, it must be read and interpreted. This introduces a human element to any appeal to the authority of a scripture (the Bible or any other), introducing a potential source of error. Most Evangelicals believe that the Holy Spirit can and sometimes does provide guidance in interpreting the Bible, but the obvious doctrinal diversity among Evangelicals indicates that the Holy Spirit does not always guide in all matters of interpretation – or at least does not always do so successfully.

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[14] I.e., if one accepts the validity of the logical principle of noncontradiction. Assuming noncontradiction, if a religion is not Christianity it will not believe all and only that which Christianity believes. It will therefore have beliefs that contradict those of Christians and that therefore will be considered to be false by evangelical Christians.

[15] A recent book by Evangelicals on postmodernism contains contributions by twenty-two authors: David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Post-Modernism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995).

[16] See articles by Evangelicals on interreligious dialogue in Mojzes and Swidler, *Christian Mission*, and in Thomas D. Senor, *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

Sources of information outside of the Bible can be useful in helping thinkers determine which doctrines and interpretations of the Bible are correct. For example, while the biblical evidence concerning whether the earth is flat or round is ambiguous, scientific evidence is useful in deciding which theory is true (or at least closest to the truth). Likewise, if the Bible is not clear whether the human will is free or is subject to causal determination (there are Christians on both sides of the issue), other considerations such as ethics may be useful in determining which theory is closest to the truth.

It is along these lines that dialogue with other religions can help evangelical Christians in their quest for truth. There are questions that the evangelical theological resources do not directly address. It is obvious that religions other than Christianity have access to their own sources of truth, since non-Christian religions do hold some doctrines that evangelical Christians agree are true.[17] If non-Christian religions have true beliefs on issues that are directly addressed by evangelical theological resources, they may well have true beliefs on issues that are not directly addressed by evangelical theological resources. This being so, it stands to reason that these religions can contribute to the evangelical understanding of issues about which the Bible is not clear.

History furnishes clear examples of non-Christian religions' and ideologies' making useful contributions to Christian theology. For example, it is well known that the Catholic philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas (whose work as an apologist is still highly regarded by many Evangelicals) was ideologically indebted to Aristotle by way of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd *(Averroes) and the Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides).* Interideological dialogue promises just as great a reward for evangelical thinkers today. One example of an area in which Evangelicals could benefit from dialogue comes from Buddhism's resistance to materialism.[18] It has been observed that persons of Buddhist background are usually less affected by materialism (the tendency to think that happiness comes from the material possessions one has) than are persons of Christian background.[19] Whatever the reasons for this, it is an area in which Christians clearly need to examine their beliefs for deficiency and can look to Buddhism for help in doing so.

Furthermore, like all people, Christians have a tremendous store of unconscious presuppositions that affect what they take to be their rationally held beliefs. Because of the nature of such presuppositions, they can be very hard for the person holding them to detect and to evaluate critically. Dialogue helps Christians to be self-critical and to assess their beliefs more objectively. Dialogue enables us to see our presuppositions from the perspective of one who does not hold to them and even from the perspective of one who opposes them.

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[17]E.g., the existence of a transcendent being, which is a doctrine affirmed by most religions; monotheism, which is affirmed by Judaism, Islam, and other religions; the practice of marriage, which is found in most cultures.

[18]Another example could come from the infrequency with which Buddhist peoples have been involved in wars, as compared to peoples of Christian background.

[19]See Trevor Ling, *Buddha, Marx, and God* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1966).

2. The Quest for a True System

Christians are involved in more than a quest for true beliefs: they want to know that their beliefs when fitted together as a system are true, that Christianity as a system of thought is itself true. Lacking an infallibilist epistemology (such as Descartes' foundationalism), the only means of assessing the relative viability of Christianity is a comparative philosophy of religion, comparing Christianity's persuasiveness, cohesiveness, and effectiveness with that of the other available worldviews. Doing comparative philosophy of religion requires interreligious dialogue.

Today there is a growing body of well-educated people who are interested in religion but who wish to have a reasonable faith that is in keeping with the scientific rationality that they experience in other parts of their lives. These people have been styled "secular believers."[20] They are religiously committed but possess an analytic intellectual predisposition that prevents them from blindly accepting a religious dogma as truth without seeing the grounds of its justification.

Secular believers will not accept a religion's claim to be true without both realizing that this claim implies that other religions are to some degree false and wanting to see for themselves that this claim is justified. For such people a comparative philosophy of religion is absolutely necessary. Therefore, those religions that adopt an "obscurantist" attitude and do not participate in interreligious dialogue will not be able to meet the intellectual needs of secular believers. If such religions appear to be afraid of comparison with other religions, they may incur the suspicion that they cannot favorably undergo such scrutiny and that their reluctance to participate in interreligious dialogue is a tacit admission of their inadequacy as a cogent system of beliefs.

3. The Obligation to Help Others in Their Quest for Truth

Evangelicals are not only concerned about discovering truth for themselves: they are also concerned – even obligated – to help others find truth. Dialogue is useful in this effort on several levels. It is necessary in order for persons with other ideologies accurately to understand evangelical beliefs and their claim to truth. Evangelicals have often employed nondialogical methods of sharing their faith. However. these methods do not enable persons with other ideologies to understand evangelical beliefs accurately, because they do not encourage the other to express his or her doubts, reservations, and uncertainties about Christianity, thus not directly addressing such areas of question. Nondialogical methods also fail, because they do not help Evangelicals to understand the people they are communicating with; hence, Evangeli-

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[20]The term "secular believer" is used in this way by Philip Clayton in his *Explanation from Physics to Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). Clayton examined the "contextualist shift" in natural science and the social sciences, then compared the latter to religion. He concluded that religious study must be intersubjectively criticizable as the sciences are, rather than fidiestic, in order to progress.

cals often do a poor job of expressing their beliefs in ways that will be clear to the other and gain a sympathetic audience.[21]

Furthermore, dialogue is useful to Evangelicals in their efforts to help others find truth, because dialogue helps the other (as well as the Evangelical) to reflect critically on his or her own tradition. Since we all have a tremendous store of unconscious presuppositions that affect our rationally held beliefs, it can be very hard for any of us to detect and to evaluate these presuppositions critically. Dialogue enables one to be self-critical and to assess one's beliefs more objectively. It can enable non-Christians to see their presuppositions from the perspective of one who does not hold to them.

4. Ideological Pluralism

The "incontrovertible fact of religious pluralism" has necessitated many *instances of dialogue. In the past, at least in North America, evangelical* Christians were geographically buffered from confrontation with disparate religious ideologies. Today, interaction between people ascribing to diverse ideologies is commonplace.[22] Evangelicals cannot avoid contact with people espousing different ideologies, nor should they wish to. Evangelicals need to be able to coexist peacefully and work together effectively with persons of differing ideologies just as much as non-Evangelicals do. Therefore, Evangelicals need to participate in interideological dialogue.

Religious pluralism is actually a situation that Evangelicals have struggled hard to bring about. Religious liberty is a teaching that has been prominent among evangelical Anabaptists since before the Reformation. Evangelical Anabaptists, the forebears of the "Free Church" movement, advocated religious freedom for all. Most Evangelicals have come to embrace the doctrine and practice of religious liberty. Religious pluralism is a necessary corollary of religious liberty.

In order for there to be religious liberty, there must be religious choices – different ideological options among which one may choose. In order for one to make an informed choice, one must have an adequately accurate understanding of the options. In order for one to understand various ideological options, one must engage in interideological dialogue. Thus, religious liberty and interreligious dialogue are also corollaries. In this way interreligious dialogue is actually a consistent part of the evangelical theological system.

5. Obligatory Charity

Everyone wants to be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. Immanuel Kant's observation that ethics involves a "categorical imperative"

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[21]These and similar reasons for evangelical participation in dialogue are expressed in Netland, "Application," pp. 265-266. See also the interesting case study by Joshua K. Diamoi, "A Case Study from Papua New Guinea," in Bruce J. Nicholls, ed., *The Unique Christ in Our Pluralistic World* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1994), pp. 57-66.

[22]Miroslav Volf presented an interesting exposition from an evangelical perspective on the effects of ideological diversity on the belief in the unity of truth in Western society; see his "A Study in Provisional Certitude," in Nicholls, *The Unique Christ*, pp. 96-106.

("I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law")[23] reflects that this desire is the basis for interpersonal ethics. If people would treat others as they themselves would like to be treated, there would be very little interpersonal strife in the world.

In the area of religious belief, people want to be treated as if they are intelligent. They also want to be treated with sensitivity. Many people violate these fundamental desires when they hear of other people's religious beliefs, by reacting in a way that indicates that the others' beliefs seem stupid. They are also violated when an over-zealous person asserts that another's religion is wrong, sometimes without even finding out what the other persons' beliefs actually are. In fact, many people do not have good reasons for what they believe, but that does not mean that there are not good reasons, or that their beliefs are wrong. Interreligious dialogue allows parties to question the other's beliefs in a way that treats the other with respect. It also forces those involved to present their beliefs in a self-critical way, thus forcing all parties to adopt an attitude of humility. It places all parties at each other's mercy, so to speak.

B. Arguments Opposing Dialogue

There are a number of objections that might be raised against the proposal that evangelical Christians ought to participate in interreligious dialogue. There are in fact whole segments of evangelicalism that oppose interreligious dialogue, especially among those Evangelicals who style themselves as "fundamentalists."[24] It is important to consider these objections, for they may arise from real insights that need to be incorporated into the greater schema of interreligious dialogue.

1. The Importance of Truth

The argument for interreligious dialogue depends in part on an epistemological move to deabsolutize "truth." If this move indicates a belief that it is not possible for Christians (or others) to know the truth about an issue, this move is rightly a cause of concern to Evangelicals. Evangelicals are Christians not just because that is the religion of their parents or friends or for other social or incidental reasons; one becomes an evangelical Christian

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[23]Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. Lewis W. Beck (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1959), p. 14. The "categorical imperative" is strikingly similar to Jesus' "golden rule," discussed below.

[24]See Ernest Pickering, *Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979). The term "evangelicalism" is used in this essay to refer to the broad subsection of Christendom described in note 1, above. Fundamentalism is seen as a sub-set of evangelicalism. There are other sub-sets of evangelicalism, such as new evangelicalism and pentecostalism. Using the terms this way is in keeping with the practice of leading historians of the movement. E.g., "[T]o understand fundamentalism we must also see it as a distinct version of evangelical Christianity uniquely shaped by the circumstances of America in the early twentieth century" (George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture—The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980], p. 3). Also see Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 32; and Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations*, 9th ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), pp. 263-265.

because he or she believes that Christianity is true. If deabsolutizing epistemology means that it is not possible to know the truth, then it is not compatible with evangelical Christianity.

However, deabsolutized epistemology does not mean it is not possible for one to know the truth. Rather, it means that in many cases, religion quite likely being one of them, it is not possible to know infallibly that what one believes to be the truth is in fact true. A belief may or may not be true regardless of whether or not one can know that it is true. For example, I may be convinced that the Denver Broncos will again win the Super Bowl next year, and it may in fact be true that the Broncos are going to win the Super Bowl next year. But, it is generally conceded that I cannot know that it is true that they will win before the game is played. Similarly, I may believe that Jesus will return to gather his people, and my belief may be correct. In that sense one might say that I know that Jesus will return, but if it is not possible to know infallibly that Jesus will return, my knowledge of this truth is deabsolutized.[25]

2. Doctrinal Purity

Another objection might be that interreligious dialogue will lead to a dilution of pure doctrine. There is a distinct possibility that in some situations a false belief would be more appealing than the truth to some individuals. If one knows that what one believes is true, and if one has reason to think that one could be easily dissuaded from that true belief when presented with false beliefs, one would probably be justified in avoiding exposure to the false beliefs.

The problem with this scenario is that if one has not considered the other options available, one is probably not in a position to conclude that they are false and that only the belief one holds as true is actually true. This scenario presupposes the kind of knowledge that only comes from participation in interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, dialogue is actually a means further to refine and purify one's knowledge of the truth. If one is really interested in finding truth, rather than just preserving a particular system of dogma, one will see dialogue as an indispensable asset.

There does seem to be a kernel of truth in this objection, all the same. There are instances in which a person abandons a belief that has good justification, in order to embrace a belief that has marginal justification. This can happen when the persons involved in discussion are not intellectually on the same level – for instance, when an atheistic college professor undermines the religious faith of a young college freshman. The lesson to be learned here is not that all dialogue should be avoided but, rather, that dialogue is only effective when the participants are intellectually capable of dialogue, are prepared to dialogue, and are intellectual equals.[26]

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[25]Examples of this need not be limited to future events; beliefs about the past and present can be true without being known to be true, as well. For a slightly different evangelical approach to de-absolutized epistemology ("provisional certitude"), see Volf's "Study in Provisional Certitude," pp. 96-105.

[26]Swidler, *After the Absolute*, pp. 28, 44, 68, 117, 195.

3. Loss of Diversity

Dialogue cannot succeed where the participants have no real differences and, therefore, have nothing to say to each other.[27] Thus, in one way dialogue highlights each participant's uniqueness,[28] but in another way it can tend to minimize diversity. One purpose of dialogue is to help the participants discern truth. Ideally, they will come to an agreement regarding what is true. If this result were common, one might conclude that it is possible that at some time (and in light of ever-increasing globalization) all reasonable persons would be in agreement regarding what is true. Thus, dialogue could lead to ideological uniformity, which some think would not be a desirable result.

One might question whether such ideological uniformity were really possible. Few would question whether it is likely. It is not, but dialogue is urgently needed to bring peace through encouraging as much uniformity (agreement) and understanding as is currently possible. Even ideological uniformity would not entail uniformity across the cultural spectrum. Diversity in taste, language, habit, etc., will still exist to add variety to life. Surely, the critics of dialogue would not wish that some persons hold to false beliefs just to add variety to other people's lives.

4. Uncooperative Ideologies

There will quite likely be ideologies that will refuse to engage in dialogue or perhaps are incompatible with it.[29] While those who are interested in dialogue desire to utilize every possible source of truth available and will be disappointed when an ideology refuses to join in dialogue, this does not negate the usefulness of dialogue in general. However, it may indicate something about the epistemological status of the ideology that is not willing to engage in dialogue, for some thinkers or leaders in certain movements may wish to discourage dialogue because they feel insecure about the ability of their ideology to stand on its own in the open forum of dialogue. Only indefensible beliefs have anything to fear from open inspection.

5. Inadmissible Ideologies

Certain ideologies have characteristics that are repugnant to others and cause potential dialogue partners to avoid dialogue with them. A clear example of this is the Nazi attitude of Aryan supremacy and of hatred toward Jews and other minorities. This situation, even when not coupled with anti-dialogical sentiments on the part of the objectionable ideology, can short-circuit dialogue. In this situation, the question arises as to whether dialogue

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[27]Dialogue presupposes both commonalties and differences; see Norbert M. Samuelson, "The Logic of Interreligious Dialogue," in Thomas Dean, ed., *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. pp. 148-149.

[28]Hans Waldenfels, "Mission and Interreligious Dialogue: What Is at Stake?" in Mojzes and Swidler, *Christian Mission*, pp. 152-153.

[29]For some ideologies that may be inherently exclusivist, it would not be possible to enter into dialogue without ceasing to be what they are.

about such inadmissible beliefs or practices ought even to be a subject of dialogue. Admitting them to dialogue may seem to grant them the status of "possibly justified."

The dialogue-appropriate answer to this appears to be that no belief or practice should be rejected in an *a priori* fashion. If a belief seems so obviously wrong that one is tempted to reject it without dialogue, then dialogue offers the hope of helping the other to see that the belief is wrong. To begin rejecting beliefs and practices without dialogical examination is to open the door to prejudice and dogma. It has often been the case that things that seem obviously wrong are in fact merely cultural differences. Only through dialogue can one hope to progress beyond prejudice to new levels of informed insight.

If, after sincere and serious attempts at dialogue have been made, a dialogue party has an incorrigible attitude toward some belief or practice that seems abhorrent to peoples of other ideological backgrounds, it may be necessary to discontinue dialogue. In some cases it may be necessary actively to oppose the incorrigible party. Such would doubtless have been the case in the instance of the Nazi persecutions.

There are many instances when it is appropriate to act according to one's beliefs, while at the same time remaining open to the possibility that one's beliefs are incorrect and participating in dialogue with those who hold to different beliefs. Opposing the Nazi persecutions during World War II would be one example of this. Another is the evangelical practice of "sharing the faith": evangelical Christians are justified in sharing their religious beliefs and the perceived benefits of these beliefs with others even while they are participating in dialogue with persons from other religious traditions. To do otherwise would be to cease being an Evangelical.[30]

IV. Biblical Arguments from an Evangelical Perspective

Evangelical Christians view the Bible as the inspired word of God. Therefore, the Bible is the primary source of theological and philosophical insight for Evangelicals. When the Bible addresses a subject in a normative fashion, Evangelicals take this as being God's perspective on the issue.[31]

Whatever the Bible has to say concerning interreligious dialogue will be taken by Evangelicals as divine revelation on the subject. However, evangelical scholars are aware that the Bible, like any other written document, is subject to the problems of hermeneutics. They advocate a grammatical-historical-contextual approach to interpretation[32] in which the degree of literalness of

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[30]Volf, "Study in Provisional Certitude," pp. 101-104.

[31]For a scholarly statement of the evangelical position on the Bible as the Word of God, see Norman L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1980).

[32]See William J. Larkin, Jr., *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), chap. 4, "The Historical-Critical Method and Hermeneutical Supplements."

interpretation will vary according to the literary genre of the passage.[33] The degree of normativeness according to which each text is applied to contemporary issues will vary according to contextual factors, including the understanding that there are different periods in the Bible wherein the progression of God's revelation is at different levels. For example, while stoning adulterers was appropriate for a certain period of time in order to enunciate the seriousness of sin, Jesus introduced a new attitude toward such behavior that enunciates the magnitude of God's mercy.

For a complete appraisal of the proper attitude of Evangelicals toward interreligious dialogue it is necessary to look at what the Bible says about the subject. Further, it is important that the biblical data be examined as interpreted according to the principles of hermeneutics accepted by evangelical scholars.

A. Arguments Opposing Dialogue

The Bible contains numerous passages that have been interpreted by some Evangelicals as opposing dialogue.[34] Let us discuss a few of the strongest examples.[35] The following are representative of the types of passages that have been interpreted as opposing interreligious dialogue.

Lev. 20:23-24, 26[36] and Josh. 23:6-8[37] are representative of the Hebrew Bible passages that command Israel to be separate from the surrounding nations. Unquestionably, Israel's interaction with other religions was supposed to be severely limited, but the purpose for this seems to have been to allow the Israelites time to reach a mature understanding of and commitment to the principles of the Jewish religion. The instances of "apostasy" from this religion that are recorded in the Bible do not have the appearance of reasoned modifications made as a result of interreligious dialogue but seem instead to be cases of Jews who have a shallow understanding of and commitment to their

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[33]See Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1989), sect. 3.4, "Meaning as Significance and Genre Considerations," and sects. 9-9.7 dealing with "Non-Literal Language."

[34]See Pickering, *Biblical Separation*, pp. 157-189; and John W. Robbins, "The Means of Sanctification," *The Trinity Review* 150 (August, 1997): 4.

[35]Space does not allow for a full exegetical exposition of these passages, but the following comments indicate what direction such an exposition would take.

[36]"'[Y]ou shall not walk in the statutes of the nation which I am casting out before you; for they commit all these things, and therefore I abhor them. But I have said to you, "You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey." I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples.' . . . 'And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine'" (*The Bible: The New King James Version* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984]; the following biblical quotations are taken from this translation).

[37]"Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left, and lest you go among these nations, these who remain among you. You shall not make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, but you shall hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have done to this day." Ernest Pickering's interpretation of this passage is very anti-dialogical: "[T]hey were not to seek to placate the heathen nations by discussing with them the fine points of their beliefs . . ." (Pickering, *Biblical Separation*, p. 170).

religion and who uncritically adopt practices from the religions surrounding them. Hence, these passages do not directly address the situation of evangelical Christians at the end of the twentieth century, except to reinforce the observation that dialogue must be between partners of equal intellectual and spiritual development.

Ezra 9:1b-3[38] seems to reflect a post-exilic Israelite community that has come to a more mature understanding of the Jewish religion and is called on to reject unacceptable aspects of the surrounding nations' religions. This rejection may be on moral grounds (some of the neighboring religions are known to have included such practices as child sacrifice) or simply because the are incompatible with the Jewish faith.

That the Israelites found it necessary to reject aspects of their neighbors' religions does not imply that they were not able to enter into dialogue with them. Actually, the implication may be just the reverse: that the Israelites had some understanding of surrounding religions may imply that some low-level dialogue actually had occurred. Though this passage does not militate against dialogue, it does confirm the observation that there may be times when a belief or practice is too unacceptable to condone and that some practices and beliefs may need to be actively opposed.

In light of the emphases on deabsolutizing truth in this essay, it is important to observe that at this period in Israel there was still an active prophetic ministry. God spoke directly to the chosen people through prophets in a way that God does not speak to evangelical Christians today.[39] Therefore, Israelites of this time period were much more justified in drawing sharp distinctions on some particular issues that the prophets had addressed than are evangelical Christians today. Today Christians are dependent on their own reason—abstractly and in interpreting the Bible—to reach proper conclusions on difficult issues. Thus, the conclusions on some issues are much more tentative than were the conclusions that Israel received through God's inspired prophets.

Ps. 139:19-22[40] depicts an attitude of utmost devotion to God, to the point of vehement opposition to God's enemies. It is representative of passages found in the poetic literary genre that are characterized by the emotional use of extreme language. Again, much of what is being rejected is rejected on

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[38]"The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands, with respect to the abominations of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is intermingled with the peoples of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass.' So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished."

[39]Pentecostal and charismatic Evangelicals will disagree with this, since they believe that there is an ongoing prophetic ministry today just as there was in biblical times.

[40]"Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do i not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies."

moral grounds, although the reason for the lack of morality in this instance seems to be the rejection of the Jewish God.

In order for a person really to reject God, he or she must understand who God is. If the wicked persons referred to in this passage understand and reject God, then there may be little about which the author of this Psalm can engage in dialogue with them. However, it is possible that the wicked ones are reacting to a misunderstanding of God, not rejecting Godself. If they are rejecting a mistaken conception of God that is not worthy of anyone's acceptance, then dialogue could help overcome this situation.

The Christian scriptures contain fewer passages that can be used to oppose dialogue than does the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, because the former speaks more directly to the evangelical Christian situation than does the latter, there are as many passages that need to be examined in the Christian as in the Hebrew scriptures.

In Mt. 16:6 and 12[41] the false teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees are compared to leaven. The meaning of this is clear: as a little leaven spreads throughout a lump of dough, so false teaching can spread throughout Christianity once it is let in. This can be true, especially when one party in a dialogue is more advanced in their understanding of their religion (the Pharisees and Sadducees) than is the other (the disciples of Christ), but the situation of the disciples is different from the situation of evangelical Christians *vis-à-vis* other religions. The disciples were very familiar with the teachings of the Pharisees and the Sadducees; some of them had even been members of these sects before following Christ. Evangelical Christians, however, usually do not know enough about other religions to accept or reject another religion's teachings.

Paul's assertion in Rom. 3:10-12, 18[42] that none seek God on their own is also relevant to the philosophy of interreligious dialogue, since interreligious dialogue seems to presuppose that all religions (at least potentially) have some truth and that many people are (in their own way) seeking God. It seems obvious that many people do in fact seek God. This may be a result of God's drawing people to Godself, as Jesus said, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself."[43] The problem posed by this passage is more along the lines of free will versus divine sovereignty, rather than interreligious dialogue.

Rom. 16:17-18 and 2 Cor. 6:14-18 are probably the passages from the Pauline corpus that are most commonly used to oppose interreligious dialogue. However, they, too, seem to be in keeping with a properly practiced dialogue. Rom. 16:17-18[44] opposes doctrinal divisiveness and deceiving the

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[41]"Then Jesus said to them, 'Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.'. . . Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

[42]"There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one. . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes."

[43]Jn. 12:32.

[44]"Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the

simple. Divisiveness occurs when one party attempts to introduce doctrine that is opposed by another party – probably a group that is well indoctrinated in the faith – in a confrontational manner. Deceiving the simple happens when a party introduces new doctrine to those who are not well indoctrinated in the faith. They may accept the new doctrine uncritically, albeit without divisiveness. True dialogue is opposed to divisiveness and to more sophisticated thinkers' imposing their views on the simple.

2 Cor. 6:14-16[45] needs to be considered within the context in which it is written in order to be correctly understood. 2 Corinthians is a letter that was written by Paul to the Christian church in Corinth. Keeping this in mind, *language such as "fellowship," "communion," "in them," and "among them"* indicates that this passage is directed to the assembled church, not individual believers. The assembled church functions as the temple of God. Paul asserts that there is a unique bond between believers within the church that cannot be had between believers and unbelievers if they are allowed into the church. The Christian scriptures are clear that there is a unique kinship among Christians that does not exist between Christians and non-Christians. Admitting unbelievers into the fellowship of the church dilutes and inhibits the church's functionality as "one body in Christ."

Understood in this way, it is clear that Paul's instructions are an admonition to regenerate church membership, a doctrine that many Evangelicals espouse. It is not an argument for separation of Christians from non-Christians outside of the church. Therefore, it cannot be an argument against interreligious dialogue.

The observation that "Evil company corrupts good habits" in 1 Cor. 15:33[46] has often been applied to interreligious dialogue. While the primary thrust of this passage in context is to the moral rather than the theological side of evil/good, the idea itself applies equally to both. But, as has been argued elsewhere in this essay, in areas where the Bible is subject to several interpretations and areas that it does not address, dialogue is necessary in order to determine what is evil and what is good. Thus, this sage observation is not an argument against dialogue but a reason for it.

These and other passages in the Bible limit interreligious dialogue in ways that are in keeping with the spirit of interreligious dialogue itself. It seems

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doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple."

[45]"'Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people."'"

[46]Eph. 5:6-7 and 11-12 should be treated similarly: "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret."

possible to interpret the separatist verses of the Bible in ways that allow for interreligious dialogue, but some verses may actually oppose interreligious dialogue. Investigating whether there is positive support for dialogue in the Bible may shed additional light on this question.

B. Arguments Favoring Dialogue

Prov. 11:14, 15:22, and 24:6 state that "in the multitude of counselors there is safety," none of which have reference to interreligious dialogue. However, this sound advice certainly applies to religious decisions just as it does to nonreligious ones. Evangelicals commonly look to each other for religious insight. Rejecting the insights of non-Evangelicals before they have even been examined is a hasty move. It could certainly be argued that a person should choose godly counsellors when making religious decisions, but defining them as "counselors who agree with the position that I already hold" is severely begging the question.

In Is. 1:18[47] God offers to enter into dialogue with humankind. Certainly, God does not have to fear falling into doctrinal error, and God's motives for dialogue are different from those of humans. Perhaps God is setting an example that people need to follow when dealing with one another.

God's self-revelation to Job,[48] Melchizedek,[49] Balaam,[50] Cornelius,[51] and other non-Jews/non-Christians, as recorded in the Bible, is evidence that non-Christians can have religious insights that are from God. Job is thought by many scholars to have preceded the time of Abraham. Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham and was a priest of God but not of the Levitical order. Balaam was used by God as a prophet in a manner identical to the Jewish prophets. Cornelius was a Roman centurion who feared God. These passages are significant because they affirm the belief that God has revealed Godself to persons who are neither Jews nor Christians.[52] Therefore, evangelical Christians have biblical warrant for seeking religious and philosophical insight from other religious traditions.

In Mt. 5:43-47[53] and 19:19[54] Jesus addressed the Christian attitude of

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[47]"'Come now, and let us reason together,' Says the Lord."

[48]Job 40:6.

[49]Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5-7.

[50]Num. 22-23.

[51]Acts 10.

[52]This can be seen in both the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition and the Wesleyan tradition (prevenient grace); see Jay T. Rock, "Resources in the Reformed Tradition for Responding to Religious Plurality," and Floyd T. Cunningham, "Interreligious Dialogue: A Wesleyan Holiness Perspective," in S. Mark Heim, ed. *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

[53]"'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.'"

[54]"'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

love. Christians are to love all people, even those with whom they do not get along and with whom they have little in common. Love includes sympathetic listening and understanding. Love necessitates trying to correct those who are in error, but it also involves trying to understand their position and why they hold it.

In Lk. 6:31 Jesus issued what has come to be known as the "golden rule": "And just as you want [others] to do to you, you also do to them likewise."[55] No one wants others to dismiss his or her beliefs out of hand. Everyone wants to be treated with respect and given a fair hearing. When it comes to relations between peoples with different religious beliefs, this necessitates interreligious dialogue.

Acts 17:10-11[56] is very instructive concerning the attitude that Christians should have when confronted by new ideologies and seeking the truth. The Jews in Thessalonica had rejected Paul's message without giving him a fair hearing. The Jews in Berea are called "fair-minded" because they did not do so but instead listened and then searched the scriptures to see if Paul's message was true. Christians should have a similar attitude of listening to others and then searching the scriptures to see if new insights or interpretations are valid.

Paul's message was a particular interpretation of the Hebrew Bible's prophecies concerning the Messiah; thus, searching the scriptures was the appropriate way to verify it. In some cases insights may be presented that are not addressed as directly in the Bible. In such instances abstract reason is one tool God has provided by which we may discern the truth.[57]

Passages abound that indicate that God can incline the heart and lead

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[55]See also Mt. 7:12: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the prophets."

[56]"Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." The following verses relate Paul's interaction with the Athenians on Mar's Hill. Some see this as a possible case of interreligious dialogue, but it appears more like evangelistic preaching. There does not seem to be a desire to come to mutual understanding of each other's beliefs, especially on the part of Paul, who straightforwardly took this as an opportunity to win converts. Also, some of the Athenians responded to Paul's presentation with "mocking" (vs. 32), not an action that encourages dialogue.

[57]Even the "evangelical" reformer John Calvin granted this: "Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge" (John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 tr. and indexed Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics 20 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], p. 545 [Book Three, chap. II, sect. 2]). "[T]he more anyone endeavors to approach to God, the more he proves himself endowed with reason" (McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes*, vol. 1, pp. 192-193 [Book One, chap. XV, sect. 6]). "Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects withoutgreat admiration. . . . Those men whom Scripture [I Cor. 2:14] calls 'natural men' were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good" (McNeill, *Calvin: Institutes*, vol. 1, pp. 274-275 [Book Two, chap. II, sect. 15]). It is

Christians to truth. Acts 20:32 is a prime example: "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."[58] Just how God does this is not made clear, but undoubtedly God uses many things in everyday life, even things that do not appear overtly religious. Christians believe that one tool is the Bible. Interreligious dialogue can be another.

Finally, the incarnation of God in Christ is the ultimate example of dialogue. In the incarnation, God is in dialogue with humankind about human nature, human need, and God's nature and abilities. Human dialogue cannot approach the greatness of God's loving dialogue with humanity, but divine dialogue is still an example that Christians must emulate.[59]

V. Conclusion

Having investigated the compelling reasons for interreligious dialogue, both philosophical and biblical, and having looked at arguments against evangelical participation in interreligious dialogue, it has become apparent that dialogue, while having the potential to be a source of dilution of evangelical doctrine, if properly done is a powerful tool to aid in the discovery of truth. Furthermore, dialogue is a means for evangelical Christians to gain a more sympathetic hearing for their understanding of the truth and to accomplish evangelical goals of religious liberty and world peace. Biblical and philosophical considerations do lead to certain limitations on the practice of dialogue, but these limitations do not prohibit Evangelicals from participating in dialogue. Rather, they form helpful boundaries to render dialogue more productive and universally beneficial. For this reason they have also been conceded as necessities by dialogue specialists outside of evangelical Christianity.

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well known that Calvin maintained a distinction between things that can be known by anyone and things that can be known only by the elect. Less well known is the high regard Calvin had for reason as a tool for acquiring knowledge that has not been supplied by God's "special revelation."

[58]See also Ps. 141:4: "Do not incline my heart to any evil thing."

[59]See Melanie A. May, "A Free Church Response to 'Missionary Challenges to the Theology of Salvation,'" in Mojzes and Swidler, *Christian Mission*, p. 221. See also Jn. 3:16 and Phil. 2.