

# Together in the Jesus Story

Bob Webber's fingerprints are all over a new call to live the narrative that really matters.

Interview by David Neff

**N**ORTHERN SEMINARY'S Bob Webber likes to tell this story. One day during his tenure at Wheaton College, a colleague remarked, "Webber, you act like there never was a Reformation."

Bob recalls saying, "You act like there never was an ancient church."

The trick for Protestants, of course, is to hold these two sources of our historical identity together, frequently returning to both periods to rediscover the wellsprings of our beliefs and our worship.

Without forsaking the achievements of the Reformation, Robert Webber has long been known for calling our attention to the rich deposit of the ancient church's faith. Almost 30 years ago, he and a group of colleagues produced "The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals." The document addressed a variety of ills by prescribing a healthy dose of historical consciousness: "We cannot be fully evangelical without recognizing our need to learn from other times and

movements concerning the whole meaning of [the] Gospel."

At the time, CT's Donald Tinder called the group "an *ad hoc* group of 46 comparatively unknown Christians . . . more or less identified with evangelical institutions or views." But despite the authors' relative obscurity, "The Chicago Call" made waves. CT published its text in full, and the editorial page cautiously commended it. *Newsweek* devoted its entire religion section to "The Chicago Call." And since 1977, evangelicals have been paying increasing attention to the early church.

Now comes another call with Bob Webber's fingerprints all over it. This one addresses different ills, but it retains some of the same historically minded prescriptions. The challenges addressed in "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future" are external ("the current cultural milieu, and the resurgence of religious and political ideologies") and internal ("evangelicals' accommodation to civil religion, rationalism, privatism, and pragmatism").

Whereas the 1977 call addressed modern ills, this 2006

## The CT Interview

WALTER CALAHAN

We could use a short quote from Webber here.



document focuses on issues in the emergent and postmodern discussions. But it does so from a very un-postmodern stance: Whereas postmoderns tend to fight against any “metanarrative,” any grand, overarching story that claims to explain the meaning of history and existence, this call commends “God’s story” as the single interpretive narrative by which the church must live.

Once again, CT publishes the text and commends it for study, dialogue, and even debate. In the next few pages, we interview Bob Webber and his Northern Seminary colleague Phil Kenyon, and then provide the complete text of “A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future.”

**The call says, “Today, as in the ancient era, a pressing issue is who narrates the world.” What does that mean?**

There are a lot of proposed narratives of the world. Some people say, “Let’s narrate the world by Communism.” (They’re still with us.) Others say, “Let’s narrate the world by Islamic fundamentalism” or “Let’s narrate the world by

democracy.” These are the three leading contenders. But God’s kingdom is what narrates the world for Christians.

**What do those stories say?**

The Communist story arises out of an atheistic view and says we have to bring workers and management together to create a communal world. The Islamic fundamentalist story is that Allah will rule over the world through Muslims. One way to implement that is to get rid of all the infidels. The story of democracy says freedom is the most important thing.

All three stories are political. In a contest between Communism, Islam, and democracy, I’ll go with democracy. But as Christians, we’re about the politics of Jesus and about the politics of the kingdom. Our primary belongingness is to that realm, as opposed to any other political realm. So we’re at odds with all earthly politics.

**All of those stories see a glorious future.**

Absolutely. And so does the Christian story.

**Most of the “calls” and “covenants” issued by evangelical groups are created in some face-to-face meeting. But this call was crafted by e-mail and on the Web. How did that work?**

It worked rather well, but it was very difficult, very time-consuming. I started off by just making a list of concerns. At various times, there were 36, 39, even up to 41 different items. We e-mailed them out broadly and said respond to this, and about 300 people responded. We read everything that came through. There wasn't a single response that wasn't seriously considered.

The way the call was developed dovetailed nicely with how the Web works. Once you put something out there, you really don't have control. We had people recommend the working document to other people, so then we would send them a copy of it.

And then one day, the current scheme just fell into place. Bang, it was there. In the end, there were four people who were e-mailing back and forth two or three times a week. And those are the four people that are called the theological editors.

**So you and Phil Kenyon were conveners, and there were four theological editors, a 25-person board of reference, and a long list of participants.**

And now we're sending it out for signatures. Soon we'll probably have 500 or 600 people.

**Why did you take on this arduous process?**

One of the things that drove me to put this together is the enormous diversity among evangelicals. There is no longer a common set of convictions around which evangelicalism evolves. One of the things I wanted to accomplish was to say that the items in this call are the fundamentals.

**You sound like a fundamentalist.**

I think I am a fundamentalist. These are the fundamentals of the faith that are applicable to the life of the church in a postmodern world. I do not think that it's any different from any historic document that attempts to unite people, but it is articulated differently. The story-formed consciousness of the document is a new kind of hermeneutic; we're calling people into a united grasp of the Christian faith that restores the biblical narrative as the primary one from which we all derive.

The big problem is that we have compartmentalized the story, and we have tried to analyze each piece of the story and even prove it. In doing that, we've lost the story. We need to regain the fullness of the story and resituate all ministry within the story's fullness; by creating a faith of propositions, we have divorced theological reflection from ministry.

**Another key element in this document is a consciousness of the church. Why is it important always to think about the gospel in the context of the church?**

God has always been about the business of creating a people to

witness to himself. And by their very existence, to be a witness for God. God calls a family into being with Abraham, calls a nation into being with Moses. God has always had a people that have witnessed to his existence. And now God has called a universal body of people, the church, to be a continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world and thus a witness to the reality of God and to

God's story. I'm asking people to see the whole world through the story of God, see the whole world through the church in its worship. Its spirituality and its life in the world embody this story.

**What difference would this make in pastoral ministry?**

We would get away from a lot of our counseling techniques and go back to confession. A lot of what we do is sin, and we need forgiveness for that sin. And confession will help us to deal with that, rather than trying to analyze ourselves into some way of feeling better about ourselves.

**How else would it affect ministry?**

Primarily in worship. Currently, worship seems to be divorced from the story. It is programmatic and narcissistic. If we resituate worship in the story, then worship tells and enacts the story of God. And God is the *subject* of that worship rather than the *object* that we worship. The *subject* acts on us in worship and forms us into Christ's likeness and thus affects our spirituality.

And today, spirituality, like worship, is divorced from the story. Spirituality is shaped by psychology, shaped by focusing on the self. It's very narcissistic instead of being our continual embodiment of the story. Spirituality is ultimately not having some sort of esoteric experience, but becoming what God created us to be and making the world what God created it to be, a place of his glory.

Hans Urs Von Balthazar said that we need to take a passage of Scripture and so internalize it that we become it. If somebody asks where's Matthew 25, we should be able to say, "Oh, it's walking over there."

**The call says some harsh things about “separatist ecclesiologies.” But can a separatist ecclesiology be a temporary expedient?**

Just today I picked up one of my favorite books—*The Principle of Protestantism* by Philip Schaff. Schaff does say that there is a principle of separation to bring about a correction. When that correction has been achieved, we ought quickly to unite again with the group from which we separated. He was using that with regard to the whole Protestant world and saying the Protestant world left the Catholic church for a correction. Once that correction has been made, he said, we should reunite again with the Catholic church.

**We'll have a hard time agreeing with each other on when *that* should happen.**

Right.

**These are the fundamentals that are applicable to the church in a postmodern world.**

# A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future

Can we get rid of 'Prologue' and have an initial cap instead?

## PROLOGUE

In every age the Holy Spirit calls the church to examine its faithfulness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, authoritatively recorded in Scripture and handed down through the church. Thus, while we affirm the global strength and vitality of worldwide evangelicalism in our day, we believe the North American expression of evangelicalism needs to be especially sensitive to the new external and internal challenges facing God's people.

These external challenges include the current cultural milieu and the resurgence of religious and political ideologies. The internal challenges include evangelical accommodation to civil religion, rationalism, privatism, and pragmatism. In light of these challenges, we call evangelicals to strengthen their witness through a recovery of the faith articulated by the consensus of the ancient church and its guardians in the traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, the Protestant Reformation, and the evangelical awakenings. Ancient Christians faced a world of paganism, Gnosticism, and political domination. In the face of heresy and persecution, they understood history through Israel's story, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of God's kingdom.

Today, as in the ancient era, the church is confronted by a host of master narratives that contradict and compete with the gospel. The pressing question is: Who gets to narrate the world? The Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future challenges evangelical Christians to restore the priority of the divinely inspired biblical story of God's acts in history. The narrative of God's kingdom holds eternal implications for the mission of the church, its theological reflection, its public ministries of worship and spirituality, and its life in the world. By engaging these themes, we believe the church will be strengthened to address the issues of our day.

## 1. On the Primacy of the Biblical Narrative

We call for a return to the priority of the divinely authorized canonical story of the Triune God. This story—Creation, Incarnation, and re-creation—was effected by Christ's recapitulation of human history and summarized by the early church in its rules of faith. The gospel-formed content of these rules served as the key to the interpretation of Scripture and its critique of contemporary culture, and thus shaped the church's

pastoral ministry. Today, we call evangelicals to turn away from modern theological methods that reduce the gospel to mere propositions, and from contemporary pastoral ministries so compatible with culture that they camouflage God's story or empty it of its cosmic and redemptive meaning. In a world of competing stories, we call evangelicals to recover the truth of God's Word as the story of the world, and to make it the centerpiece of evangelical life.

## 2. On the Church, the Continuation of God's Narrative

We call evangelicals to take seriously the visible character of the church. We call for a commitment to its mission in the world in fidelity to God's mission (*Missio Dei*), and for an exploration of the ecumenical implications this has for the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church. Thus, we call evangelicals to turn away from an individualism that makes the church a mere addendum to God's redemptive plan.

Individualistic evangelicalism has contributed to the current problems of churchless Christianity, redefinitions of the church according to business models, separatist ecclesiologies, and judgmental attitudes toward the church. Therefore, we call evangelicals to recover their place in the community of the Church catholic.

## 3. On the Church's Theological Reflection on God's Narrative

We call for the church's reflection to remain anchored in the Scriptures in continuity with the theological interpretation learned from the early fathers. Thus, we call evangelicals to turn away from methods that separate theological reflection from the common traditions of the church. These modern methods compartmentalize God's story by analyzing its separate parts, while ignoring God's entire redemptive work as recapitulated in Christ. Anti-historical attitudes also disregard the common biblical and theological legacy of the ancient church.

Such disregard ignores the hermeneutical value of the church's ecumenical creeds. This reduces God's story of the world to one of many competing theologies and impairs the unified witness of the church to God's plan for the history of the world. Therefore, we call evangelicals to unity in "the tradition that has been believed everywhere, always, and by all," as well as to humility and charity in their various Protestant traditions.

# A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future

## 4. On the Church's Worship as Telling and Enacting God's Narrative

We call for public worship that sings, preaches, and enacts God's story. We call for a renewed consideration of how God ministers to us in baptism, Eucharist, confession, the laying on of hands, marriage, healing, and through the charisms of the Spirit, for these actions shape our lives and signify the meaning of the world. Thus, we call evangelicals to turn away from forms of worship that focus on God as a mere object of the intellect or that assert the self as the source of worship. Such worship has resulted in lecture-oriented, music-driven, performance-centered, and program-controlled models that do not adequately proclaim God's cosmic redemption. Therefore, we call evangelicals to recover the historic substance of worship of Word and table and to attend to the Christian year, which marks time according to God's saving acts.

## 5. On Spiritual Formation in the Church as Embodiment of God's Narrative

We call for a catechetical spiritual formation of the people of God that is based firmly on a Trinitarian biblical narrative. We are concerned when spirituality is separated from the story of God and baptism into the life of Christ and his body. Spirituality, made independent from God's story, is often characterized by legalism, mere intellectual knowledge, an overly therapeutic culture, New Age Gnosticism, a dualistic rejection of this world, and a narcissistic preoccupation with one's own experience. These false spiritualities are inadequate for the challenges we face in today's world. Therefore, we call evangelicals to return to a historic spirituality like that taught and practiced in the ancient catechumenate.

## 6. On the Church's Embodied Life in the World

We call for a cruciform holiness and commitment to God's mission in the world. This embodied holiness affirms life, biblical morality, and appropriate self-denial. It calls us to be faithful stewards of the created order and bold prophets to our contemporary culture. Thus, we call evangelicals to intensify their prophetic voice against forms of indifference to God's gift of life, economic and political injustice, ecological insensitivity, and the failure to champion the poor and marginalized. Too often we have failed to stand prophetically against the culture's captivity to racism, consumerism, political correctness, civil religion, sexism, ethical relativism, violence, and the culture of death. These failures have muted the voice of Christ to the world through his church and detract from God's story of the world, which the church is collectively to embody. Therefore, we call the church to recover its counter-cultural mission to the world.

## EPILOGUE

In sum, we call evangelicals to recover the conviction that God's story shapes the mission of the church to bear witness to God's kingdom and to inform the spiritual foundations of civilization. We set forth this call as an ongoing, open-ended conversation. We are aware that we have our blind spots and weaknesses. Therefore, we encourage evangelicals to engage this call within educational centers, denominations, and local churches through publications and conferences.

We pray that we can move with intention to proclaim a loving, transcendent, triune God who has become involved in our history. In line with Scripture, creed, and tradition, it is our deepest desire to embody God's purposes in the mission of the church through our theological reflection, our worship, our spirituality, and our life in the world, all the while proclaiming that Jesus is Lord over all creation.

This call is issued in the spirit of *sic et non*; therefore, those who affix their names to this call need not agree with all its content. Rather, its consensus is that these are issues to be discussed in the tradition of *semper reformanda* as the church faces the new challenges of our time. Over a period of seven months, more than 300 persons have participated via e-mail to write the Call. These men and women represent a broad diversity of ethnicity and denominational affiliation. The four theologians who most consistently interacted with the development of the Call have been named as theological editors. The board of reference was given the special assignment of overall approval.

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**Conveners:** *Robert E. Webber*, Myers professor of ministry, Northern Seminary; *Philip C. Kenyon*, director, Grow Center for Biblical Leadership, Northern Seminary.

**Theological Editors:** *Hans Boersma*, Packer professor of theology, Regent College; *Howard Snyder*, professor of world mission, Asbury Theological Seminary, and university professor of world Christianity, Spring Arbor University; *Kevin J. Vanhoozer*, research professor of systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; *D. H. Williams*, professor of patristics and historical theology, Baylor University.

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For a collection of Web links to information about "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future," a list of signatories, and a follow-up conference, go to [christianitytoday.com/go/aefcall](http://christianitytoday.com/go/aefcall). "A Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future," © Northern Seminary 2006, Robert Webber and Phil Kenyon. Permission is granted to reproduce the Call in unaltered form with proper citation.

