PUTTING THE UNITY BACK IN COMMUNITY:

SEEKING UNDERSTANDING IN AMERICAN

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

A Thesis

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by

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## Acknowledgements

**Introduction: Christian Frustration**

Today, Christian thought and practice in the United States has become so diverse, a common vision and mission among Christians appears to be/is a seemingly impossible task. As someone who desires to live a life focused on faithfully loving and serving God within a Christian community, this lack of togetherness has become a personal frustration. I have witnessed this disconnect in Christianity result in the absence of common understanding among Christians. This lack of unity has prevented both others and myself from growing in faith and serving God together. These thoughts and feelings have resulted in a lack of trust among my Christian friends and acquaintances who are also seeking out God's truth because of their conviction that I am not living out what they deem to be a "Christian life." At the same time, I realize that I am not immune to these judgments either, as I have made them myself numerous times. These feelings are often what I consider to be a tug-of-war between the "Christian right" and "Christian left." Since these on-going thoughts and feelings are, most of the time, too difficult to identify as one specific, researchable subject, I have chosen to direct my attention to an experience of what I understand as an "evangelical-focused" approach to Christianity that is present within denominations across the United States. Recognizing this, I will begin not only by narrowing my focus further, but also explaining the reason behind this claim.

I have observed in my home congregation in the Midwestern United States that although we are a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (often labeled the most "liberal" of the three major branches of Lutheranism), both full-time the pastors teach a more "evangelical" curriculum which could be categorized as a conservative

Protestantism.[1] For example, in January of 2008, my church started a 12-lesson DVD series entitled "The Truth Project," which is an entity of *Focus on the Family*. *Focus on the Family* was founded in 1977 by James C. Dobson, whose "ideas were well received by evangelicals, many of whom lamented what they saw as a decline in morality in American society."[2] This organization publishes magazines for specialized audiences, distributes Dobson's and other conservative evangelical publications, and also produces several syndicated radio shows.[3]

According to my senior pastor, the Minnesota Family Council estimates that some 120 churches in Minnesota of all different denominations (including Lutheran churches) have committed themselves to viewing "The Truth Project."[4] In my church alone, an average of 190 adults (out of an approximate 850 regular attendees at Sunday morning services) have attended each Wednesday night gathering to view a different lesson of "The Truth Project." This has been the most well attended non-Sunday event that our church has ever hosted. Here are some of the responses from the individuals who have viewed "The Truth Project:" "This is the best thing ever that you have brought to [this congregation]," "I go away with my head hurting," "All of a sudden the light bulb went on in my mind and I understand things that I was uncomfortable with but didn't know

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[1] The Senior Pastor received a Master's of Divinity from Luther Seminary (an ECLA affiliated seminary) and a doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary (an evangelical institution). The other full-time pastor was ordained through International Ministerial Fellowship (IMF is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals) and received theological training through Youth With A Mission (YWAM), a mission-focused, non-denominational organization.

[2] Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism,* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004), 265.

[3] Ibid.

[4] All of the statistics in this paper that involve my congregation are taken from email interviews with the senior and intern pastors at my church. Direct quotes from both pastors are also taken from these interviews. In order to respect each pastor's right to privacy, they will be left anonymous throughout the paper. Both of these email interviews were sent out on April 3, 2008 and received on April 16, 2008.

why," and "What can we do?" These positive responses combined with the large number of consistent attendees, is proof that "The Truth Project" has been highly influential. Hearing this praise, the question becomes, why is "The Truth Project" so popular? What need is it meeting and what does it say about living a Christian life?

I will focus on what "The Truth Project" has deemed important and relevant today and what claims it makes on holding a Christian world-view. But before looking at these more closely, I will provide more support for the popularity of evangelicalism in the United States and further explore the meaning of the term evangelical. Ultimately, my objective is to set straight incorrect perceptions and inform the reader of the evangelical thought behind *Focus on the Family's* "The Truth Project" and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) with the intention to spark dialogue and promote unity between those with differing Christian viewpoints. In this process I will claim that the "The Truth Project" does not promote a form of Christian unity that is as inclusively effective as the ELCA.

Unity is a significant endeavor in Christianity because how polarized Christian thought has become. There appears to be a fear among American Christians of different thoughts and views of, well, Christianity. Opinions like "Those fundamentalists are tearing our country apart with their exclusive 'family values'" and "Those pluralists are watering down the true message of Christ" are commonly stated without any constructive dialogue. Thoughts like these express that there is a fear of the other. This is not just a problem within Christianity, but throughout the world. Because of this, I see an immediate need to start to understand the viewpoints and perspectives of others before we allow this fear to develop into a culture of hate. This hate starts on the seemingly

subtle level of misunderstanding or disagreement. From here, this can easily turn into an "I'm right, you're wrong" attitude that blocks meaningful dialogue from happening. In the context of this paper, open dialogue between "conservative" and "liberal" Christians must happen if walls of distrust and skepticism are to fall down.

But what if one viewpoint of Christian thought excludes the other? Why should I waste energy attempting to dialogue when a certain form of Christian thought refuses to listen to me? First, it must be acknowledged that this is an important and legitimate concern. Many Christians are turned away from one another because of hurtful actions, disrespectful word choice, and a fear of being looked down upon (just to mention a few). All of these prevent dialogue from occurring. If Christians are going to attempt to unify, they must humble their opinions, thought, and words. As Ephesians 4:2 tells us: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love (NIV)."

There is an opportunity for humility in a variety of situations. For instance, if an individual or group does not agree with you on a theological issue, it is counterproductive (and possibly hypocritical) to brush them off as close-minded. For another example, when someone refuses to listen to what you have to say, this does not mean that you should ignore what they are telling you, as frustrating as it may be realizing that their desire for dialogue may not be the same as yours. One should not expect to change one's mind after a 30 minute conversation nor a 48 page paper seeking Christian understanding. Considering and possibly even confirming that another's viewpoint of how to live a Christian life is valid does not mean that one has to believe in it, but rather that you believe that the person who holds it is desires the same that you do as a Christian: to love and serve God. Whether one is a nondenominational evangelical or an ELCA

evangelical, a Christian or non-Christian; taking a closer look at the differences in evangelical thought should speak to anyone who asks "Why can't Christians with diverse theological backgrounds strive for unity?"

Before exploring current evangelical thought in the United States, there should be an understanding of why American evangelicalism is important to study. Professor Stephen Prothero, chairman of the religion department at Boston University, states that "The trend is toward more personal religion, and evangelicals offer that."[5] He claims that the large numbers of Americans who are leaving mainline religion and the large numbers who are still embracing the enthusiasm of evangelical Christianity, have the same desire: a personalized religious experience.[6] In the United States, evangelicals represent the largest and most active segment of religious life[7], as recent polls suggest that 35 to 45 percent of Americans consider themselves to be evangelical Christians.[8] Because of the prominence of American evangelicalism today, we will next investigate the history behind evangelicalism in the United States.

**[Brief] History of Evangelicalism in the United States**

According to Randall Balmer, a professor of American religious history at Barnard College and Columbia University, evangelicalism derives its name from "evangel" which is a reference to the first four books of the New Testament- written by

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[5] Neela Banerjee, "Americans Change Faiths at Rising Rate, Report Finds," *The New York Times.* (February 25, 2008).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 9.

[8] Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America. An Evangelical's Lament.* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 207.

the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.[9] *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook* states that "evangelical" itself is Greek for "good news."[10] In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther challenged Roman Catholicism's authority, claiming that the Bible alone provided everything the believer needed to obtain salvation rather than the scriptures interpreted only by the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church.[11] Luther's "rediscovery of the gospel" lent a further, decidedly Protestant, meaning to the term "evangelical."[12] Evangelicalism was, and still is, linked with the Reformation evangel: "justification by faith according to the authority of Scripture."[13] Because of the unique encounter that each priestly believer had with the biblical text and the personal gift of grace by the trusting heart (which were taken further by the movements of Pietism, Puritanism, Awakenings, and revivalism), "scriptural loyalties and the experience of faith were thus radicalized and interiorized, their intensification evidenced by a rigorous personal morality and a passion for sharing the gospel."[14] This passion for sharing the gospel message took on multiple forms by those who identified as evangelical and therefore the term itself has continually evolved.

In 1867, the Evangelical Alliance (originally founded in London in 1846) took root in the United States which was considered to be "one of the earliest attempts to bring

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[9] Ibid, xii.

[10] Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook (Third Edition)*. (Millerton, New York: Grey House Publishing, 2007), 477.

[11] Balmer, *Kingdom*, xii-xiii.

[12] Ibid, xiii.

[13] Gabriel Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 4.

[14] Ibid.

about cooperation between the various Protestant denominations."[15] The influence of this

alliance began to die out at the turn of 20th century, and by 1908, the Evangelical Alliance

was replaced by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.[16]

By the 1920s, the terms "fundamentalist," "evangelical" and "conservative

Christian" all were more or less interchangeable; "each referring broadly to those

Christians who subscribed to the five or six basic fundamentals set forth at the Niagara

Bible Conference of 1895[17] and in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (1910-

1915)."[18] These essentials included "the inerrancy of the Bible, the deity and virgin birth

of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the second

coming [of Christ]."[19] As the term "fundamentalism" became widely understood as an

aggressive and exclusionist type of conservative Christianity, by the late 1940s, many

conservative Christians (such as Billy Graham) preferred to be considered "evangelical"

since fundamentalism held such a negative image for a majority of Americans.[20] After

evangelicalism and fundamentalism unofficially established themselves as two separate

forms of Christian thought, there was once again a movement to create an alliance

amongst evangelicals-- which potentially meant that evangelicalism would become an

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[15] William W. Sweet, "Evangelical Alliance," Stanley I. Kutler (ed.), *Dictionary of American History (Third Edition): Volume 3.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 263.

[16] Ibid.

[17] The Niagara Conference became an important tool in the propagation and the popularization of dispensational premillennialism among American evangelicals.
Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 493.

[18] Utter and Storey, *Religious Right*, 477.

[19] Ibid, 37.

[20] Ibid, 477.

official denomination. But, by the early 1970s, "the prospect of a massive evangelical alliance seemed annually more remote, and by mid-decade it was gone."[21]

Whether or not there was a possibility for an alliance amongst evangelicals did not radically affect the movement's popularity, as *Newsweek* declared 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical."[22] Aided by publicity like this, Christ and culture in the United States had become increasingly indistinguishable from one another within evangelical thought.[23] Since evangelicalism started interacting with American culture through means such as popular music and television, Americans witnessed this movement first hand. Because of this interaction with the culture, Americans were more likely to embrace this style of Christianity in comparison to fundamentalism, which at the time opted to separate itself from "mainstream" culture. This is one of the main reasons why the term evangelical still has a more positive association with the American public than fundamentalism does today. It is important to note, though, that the difference today between a fundamentalist and an evangelical is more a matter of temperament than theology.[24] To illustrate this point, take Billy Graham and Pat Robertson: a few reasons why evangelical Billy Graham gained more popular appeal than fundamentalist Pat Robertson (for Christians and non-Christians alike) is because of the inclusive and inviting way Graham presents the Christian message opposed to the exclusive and convicting manner in which Robertson

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[21] George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 63.

[22] David Wells, "On Being Evangelical: Some Theological Differences and Similarities," Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, George A. Rawlyk, *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond 1700-1990.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 398.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Utter and Storey, *Religious Right,* 477.

preaches. So, the question remains: how should the loaded term "evangelical" be understood and used today?

**Evangelicalism Today**

*The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook* understands "evangelical" to refer to those Christians who emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus, biblical authority in matters of faith and practice and the necessity of sharing the Gospel with others.[25] British historian David Bebbington specifically identifies evangelicalism as a faith based on conversionism (emphasis on "born again" idea of a religious awakening), biblicalism (reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority), activism (concern for sharing the faith) and crucicentrism (focus on Jesus the Christ's redeeming work on the cross).[26] Since these definitions represent all evangelicals to a certain extent, the focus will now turn towards an understanding of how these common evangelical beliefs are interpreted by non-denominational evangelicals and ELCA evangelicals.

The ECLA identifies with the term "evangelical" because it reflects Martin Luther's broader idea behind challenging Roman Catholic accretions to Christian theology, rather than the focus of many successive evangelicals who "have insisted on a literalistic hermeneutic for understanding the Bible."[27] Similarly to Martin Luther, the ELCA does not make any specific claims on how the authority of Scripture should be interpreted. Today, within the ELCA, according to Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia professor Dr. Erik Heen, "there is a disconcerting level of divergence as to

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Noll, *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 8.

[27] Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), xiv.

how best to interpret the Scriptures and to what extent and in what ways biblical authority informs, shapes, and norms the life of the individual Christian and this church itself."[28] Because of the lack of explicit direction on biblical authority in ELCA documents, pastors within this Lutheran denomination are at liberty to interpret what this authority means and still be recognized as a faithful member of the ELCA. Case in point, my senior pastor, who I have claimed teaches from a more conservative Protestant standpoint, believes that the Lutheran take on Christianity is particularly profound and his theological values are grounded in the same basic principles that the ELCA promotes:

> "[In believe in] The Law – Gospel tradition, the centrality of grace, the centrality of Christ, the believer being simultaneously saint and sinner, the centrality of justification by grace through faith are profound and deeply embedded in God's revelation to man in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. These central tenets inform my preaching and teaching."

At the same time, my senior pastor endorses the evangelical "The Truth Project" because it "offers a worldview that much current ELCA teaching…simply cannot provide." To further understand the theological thought of the senior pastor of my home church, it is important to note that he received his Master's of Divinity at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota (which is known to offer the most diversity in theological thought out of the ELCA seminaries), and a doctorate at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California- a well-established evangelical seminary. As historian George Marsden notes, churches of different denominations led by Fuller graduates might have more in common with each other than with many churches of their own denominations.[29] Because of this, it is easier for evangelicalism to be spread in

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[28] Erik Heen, "Scriptural Theology and the ELCA: Challenges and Resources," *Lutherans Read the Bible Consultation.* (ELCA, Chicago: January 19, 2007), 7.

"mainline" denominations since evangelicalism is not considered to be a denomination itself. These factors offer an explanation of why my senior pastor teaches and preaches a more "evangelical" curriculum. Teaching with a more evangelical mindset is not surprising within the ELCA there since are multiple perspectives of how "evangelical" is understood. Next we will look at another issue that has affected the evangelical community.

In 1994, evangelical scholar Mark Noll stated that evangelicalism has become anti-intellectual in the sense that the evangelical mind theologically neglects serious attention to the mind, nature, society and the arts.[30] Noll supports this viewpoint by quoting Os Guinness:

> Evangelicals have been deeply sinful in being anti-intellectual ever since the 1820s and 1830s...And [because of this] you can see that most evangelicals simply don't think. For example, there has been no serious evangelical public philosophy in this century...It has always been a sin not to love the Lord our God with our minds as well as our hearts and souls...Evangelicals need to repent of their refusal to think Christianly and to develop the mind of Christ.[31]

Guinness, who made this critique of evangelical thought in 1992, has since then been featured in "The Truth Project" which has, with his help, attempted to bring back the intellectual mind to evangelicalism. The intellectual mind is focused on because of the call the love God with our minds that is found in Luke 10:27: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind."(NIV). This biblical command is also a focus of my senior pastor,

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[29] Marsden, *Reforming*, 275.

[30] *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 23.

[31] Ibid. ("Persuasion for the New World: An Interview with Dr. Os Guinness," *Crucible* 4, 2 Summer 1992: 15).

who encourages his congregation to become more Christ-like through the renewing of their minds, a challenge supported by Romans 12:2: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind (NIV)." His desire to incorporate scholarship with a training base for sending out spiritually empowered disciples through his teachings was also an emphasis in his evangelical theological education at Fuller Theological Seminary.[32] Since "The Truth Project" also combines personal faith with scholarship and has a similar evangelical viewpoint of how these should intersect, it's no surprise that my home church is involved in this DVD series.

Not all scholars agree evangelicalism is (or ever was) anti-intellectual. Historian George Marsden claims that fundamentalist thought (which is still very much alive in evangelical teachings like "The Truth Project") is not anti-intellectual at all, but instead an intellectual tradition alien to most modern academics.[33] Marsden states:

> Fundamentalist thought often appears anti-intellectual because of its proneness to oversimplification. The universe is divided into two- the moral and the immoral, the forces of light and darkness. This polarized thinking reflects a crass popularizing that indeed is subversive to serious intellectual inquiry...Nevertheless, fundamentalist thinking also reflects a modern intellectual tradition that dates largely from the Enlightenment.[34]

Marsden argues that "Fundamentalists have the confidence of Enlightenment philosophies that an objective look at 'the facts' will lead to the truth." For instance, both "The Truth Project" and fundamentalist attack on Darwinism (explored later on in this paper) reflect the understanding "that the developmentalist, historicist, and culturalist

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[32] George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism.* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 83.

[33] Marsden, *Understanding,* 118.

[34] Ibid, 117.

[35] Ibid, 118.

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assumptions of modern thought undermine the certainties of knowledge" and therefore it

is incorrect to think of fundamentalist thought as pre-modern!"[36] Marsden concludes this

argument for intellectual fundamentalism by claiming:

> Truth is a matter of true and precise propositions that, when properly
> classified and organized, will work. This thought is in fact highly suited
> to the technological strand of contemporary modern culture since
> everything fits neatly into a system.[37]

Whether or not evangelicalism is intellectual or anti-intellectual, the concern is

the same: intellect must be a part of evangelical Christian belief.

As has been expressed, evangelicalism today is just as difficult to define as it was

30 years ago- if not more so. Currently the term has been simplified and widely

understood among American Christians to mean two things. The first uses "evangelical"

in reference to any Protestant church that teaches and believes in biblical authority and

salvation through Christ Jesus by faith.[38] The second understanding of "evangelical"

refers to being enthusiastic and/or charismatic in the sharing one's Christian faith and

belief with the hope that others also will come to have a personal relationship with Christ

Jesus.[39] Many pastors and scholars have attempted to change these definitions by either

attempting to make a case against one of the above understandings of "evangelicalism,"

or by emphasizing and expanding upon one of the above definitions to encourage

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid, 119.

[38] Erik Ullestad, "Movie/Video Study: Jesus Camp." ELCA Youth Ministries, 2007. *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.* http://72.14.205.104/u/ELCAorg?q=cache:CgkdORsFw1AJ:www.elca.org/youth/reelworld/jesuscamp.html+definition+of+evangelical&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=2&gl=us&ie=UTF-8. (2008).

[39] Ibid.

individuals to live according to their "evangelical" convictions. This tug-or-war of what an evangelical should believe has created a separation in Christian thought.

Not only have there been disagreements on what constitutes as evangelical thought, but there is also a recognizable separation between evangelical and non-evangelical Christians. As in the debate of who is representing the "real" evangelicalism, the evangelical and non-evangelical divide among Christians appears to be impossible to cross without an understanding of how they each view one another and what their perspective actually is. Christian Smith, in *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want*, states:

> Evangelicals often feel excluded, marginalized, or discriminated against by secular institutions and elites. And many nonevangelicals view evangelical Christians with deep suspicion, as enemies of freedom and liberal democracy.[40]

These feelings are deeply rooted in our religious culture in the United States. How can common ground be found when Christian identity varies so greatly? How should Christians attempt to unify? These questions are concerned with whether Christian unity or diversity has become emphasized among Christians. I will be taking a closer look at Christian diversity and unity within evangelical thought as well as focusing on what evangelical attempts have been made to unite American Christians.

### *Focus on the Family's* "The Truth Project"

With the sponsorship of an organization like *Focus on the Family*, "The Truth Project" would not have reached the amount of people that it has. Non-denominational organizations like *Focus on the Family* (which are usually evangelical in thought) got

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[40] Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want.* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000), 4.

their start in the early 19th century when these "special purpose groups" were created by religious reformers in the United States who "conscientiously avoided denominational labels in order to carry ministries into new areas."[41]  Because *Focus on the Family* is not affiliated with a specific Christian denomination, they are considered a modern day special purpose group. These purpose groups started to take off in the U.S. during the 1960s and early 1970s and statistically "grew at a pace at least a third faster than denominations."[42]  One of the targets of special purpose groups is provide teachings or opportunities that specific denominations are not offering, as is one of the reasons why my pastor sees a need for "The Truth Project" to viewed by his congregation.

Like what many special purpose groups have accomplished, "The Truth Project" has evoked a sense of commitment from those involved.[43]  This is the commitment to come back almost every Wednesday night for four months to watch the next installment of DVD series.  Since the screening of these DVDs doesn't take place on Sunday mornings, people who show up to watch them not only are more actively involved within the church, but are also viewed as individuals who are seeking out tough questions about Christianity.  Now there is a better understanding of non-denominational groups like *Focus on the Family*, we can now turn our attention to what this special purpose group is endorsing.

"The Truth Project" is a DVD-based curriculum comprised of 12 one-hour lessons that range in topics from "Veritology: What is Truth?" (Lesson one) to

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[41] Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion.* (Princeton, New Jersey:  Princeton University Press, 1988), 104.

[42] Ibid, 113.

[43] Ibid, 122.

"Community and Involvement: God Cares, Do I?" (Lesson twelve). This small group

curriculum is presented by Dr. Del Tackett, the President of the *Focus on the Family*

Institute.[44] The series is advertised as a starting point for looking at life from a Biblical

perspective, as each lesson discusses in detail the relevance and importance of living out

a Christian worldview on a daily basis.[45]

But why "The Truth Project?" According to the website:

> In a recent study, the Barna Research Group revealed a stunning statistic
> that continues to reverberate throughout the evangelical world. Only 9
> percent of professing Christians have a biblical worldview.[46] Because of
> this, today's believers live very similarly to non-believers. A personal
> sense of significance is rarely experienced, we spend our money and time
> on things that fail to satisfy and we begin to wonder what life's ultimate
> purpose really is. We are, in short, losing our bearings as a people and a
> nation.[47]

"The Truth Project" positions itself within the evangelical movement in three

basic ways. First, this DVD series is an entity of *Focus on the Family*, which is one of

the largest conservative evangelical-principled, non-denominational organizations in the

U.S. and is known for endorsing "traditional Christian values." Second, like most

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[44] *Focus on the Family* Institute "provides a personalized undergraduate semester program that crosses academic and professional disciplines. Both the fall/spring semester and the summer semester address issues facing our culture such as: worldview belief systems, public policy issues, the decline of the family and the role of the church in society." 88 students attend the Institute each semester which is located in Colorado Springs, Colorado. "About FFI," *Focus on the Family Institute*, 2003. http://www.focusinstitute.org/AboutUs.asp. (2008).

[45] "What is Focus on the Family's The Truth Project?" *Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008. http://www.thetruthproject.org/whatistruthproject/. (2008).

[46] "A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life." *The Barna Update*. December 1, 2003. http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=24059.
Directed by George Barna, the Barna Group provides information on subjects like religious beliefs, the Bible, evangelism, the mass media, economics, and parenting. The Group also includes regular updates on such religious topics as American attitudes toward religious belief, religious behavior, and popular culture. (Utter and Storey, *Religious Right*, 470).

[47] "What is Focus on the Family's The Truth Project?"

nondenominational evangelicalism, it is theologically fundamentalist. Third, it claims

there is absolute truth is and shows the viewer what the Christian world-view should look

like according to Scripture. Assertions about absolute truth and Scripture are traditional

evangelical claims. The founder of *Focus on the Family*, James Dobson (who has a

doctorate degree in Child Development from the University of Southern California), says

this about "The Truth Project:"

> Given today's rampant relativism, it's more important than ever that
> believers demonstrate an unwavering commitment to absolute truth, and
> our worldview curriculum is designed to provide a comprehensive
> understanding of Scripture's teaching on some of the most important
> issues of our time.[48]

To identify where "The Truth Project" is coming from, we need to find out how

the project defines "truth." Their definition of truth has multiple facets. The word itself

is defined as "that which conforms to reality," but must be understood in the context of

how one's personal worldview is defined: "the set of individual truth claims which I

embrace so deeply that I believe they reflect what is really real- and therefore they drive

what I think, how I act, and what I feel."[49] As the website states: "Many people today-

unfortunately, most people- don't seem to think that there is any universal standard of

absolute truth. But we believe differently."[50] "The Truth Project" goes on to say:

> For us, the "truth" is God's truth, as set forth supremely and most
> definitively in the Bible- and we regard this truth to be absolute in the
> sense that it cannot be compromised and is not open to purely subjective

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[48] "Does Dr. James Dobson support Focus on the Family's The Truth Project?" *Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008. http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=24011. (2008).

[49] How does *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project®* define "truth"? *Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008. http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=25113. (2008).

[50] Ibid.

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interpretation.  Ultimately, we cannot dissect the truth; we can only proclaim it.[51]

By defining "truth" as "God's truth," they focus on what they view to be truth claims made by the Bible.  Because of this, the "The Truth Project" also expresses the need to define how they understand the term "biblical worldview."

World-view, originally a German concept, translates literally as "a way of looking at the world."[52]  From here, "The Truth Project" emphasizes its purpose is to help developing a biblical worldview: "A formal worldview based ultimately upon that nature, character, and being of God as it is expressed in His infallible Word [the Bible] and His creation.  It becomes the foundation for a life system that governs every area of existence."[53]  This understanding of the Bible is the foundation of the claims made in "The Truth Project."  "The Truth Project" states:

> As we understand it, a biblical 'worldview' is not concerned with anything as specific as old-earth/young-earth interpretations of Genesis or Catholic/Protestant debates about heaven and purgatory.  Instead, it focuses on the big, basic issues of human life: the existence of God, the nature of reality, the existence and knowability of absolute truth, and the moral and ethical implications of these and other primary questions.[54]

The last term to define that is essential to understanding the lens that "The Truth Project" is looking through is "post-modernism."

> We understand the noun 'postmodernism' to refer to a philosophy or mindset that rejects the value of rational thought, denies the existence of

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[51] Ibid.

[52] "How does *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project*® define "worldview"?" *Focus on the Family.* 1999-2008.
http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=14307.  (2008).

[53] "How does *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project*® define 'truth'?"

[54] "How does *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project*® define 'worldview'?"

moral and spiritual absolutes, and affirms the right and power of the individual to invent his or her own 'reality.' This way of thinking is incompatible with the Christian perspective because it denies the existence of a truth that is valid for all people at all times. In other words, it rejects the claims of the Gospel on principle, without even granting it a hearing. It's precisely this kind of thinking that Focus on the Family's "The Truth Project" is designed to counter.[55]

According to their website, Del Tackett has made "a deliberate effort to avoid emphasizing any particular theological interpretation" within the "The Truth Project" in order to keep with the interdenominational nature of *Focus on the Family*.[56] This interdenominational nature allows evangelical teachings like "The Truth Project" to have the ability to appeal across denominational boundaries. It also resonates with Christians who view denominations as limiting and potentially exclusive.

Before moving on, it important to note that each term defined above (truth, Christian worldview, and postmodernism) begins with either a "For us," "As we understand it," or "We understand." This suggests that they are not making a blanket statement speaking for all of Christianity. The language used throughout "The Truth Project" does imply that they have firm ideas about what Christians should believe, but they do acknowledge that they, no matter what their claims may be, are not the sole Christian authority on the topics they discuss.

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[55] How does *Focus on the Family's The Truth Project*® define postmodernism? *Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008.
http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=23899. (2008).

[56] What is the statement of faith for *Focus on the Family's "The Truth Project?" Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008.
http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=25114. (2008).

UNDERSTANDING "TRUTH"

Before digging into how "The Truth Project" understands "truth," it will be helpful to briefly understand a little more history behind evangelicalism. After evangelicals broke away from the fundamentalists in the late 1940s, they focused their energies on promoting interdenominational cooperation for the spread of Christianity, a more productive approach toward the complicated relationship between evangelism and social ethics, and a combination of up-to-date scholarship and firm commitment to the theological tenants of conservative Protestantism.[57] One of the tenants of conservative Protestantism is to be defenders of timeless theological truths.[58] The following statements by "The Truth Project" are a part of these theological truths.

The first lesson in "The Truth Project" is entitled "Veritology: What is Truth?" This lesson looks at how truth plays a role "in the biblical view of the world, God's purpose for the cosmos, His will for mankind, His plan of salvation, and the way we live our personal lives."[59] Dr. Del Tackett demonstrates "how truth was fundamental to the mission of Jesus Christ in the world, how it forms the heart of the Cosmic Battle that has been raging since the beginning, how this battle has divided the world into two opposing camps or sides, how lies, the antithesis of truth, take human hearts and minds captive by the power of deception, and how every man and woman now stands in the position of having to choose between God's truth claims and the opposing perspective of the world."

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[57] Wuthnow, *Restructuring*, 177.

[58] Ibid.

[59] "The Truth Project Lesson Guide: Lesson 1: Veritology: What is Truth?" *Media Preference: Text Summary: Focus on the Family's The Truth Project,* 2008. http://www.thetruthproject.org/The%20Truth%20Project%20-%20Lesson%20Guide.swf. (2008).

the flesh, and the devil."[60] Tackett consults the 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary to answer "What is truth," which defines it as "Conformity to fact or reality..."[61] The idea behind citing an early 19th century dictionary is to understand the definitions of certain terms (like truth in this case) before the influence of modernism or post-modernism changed what these words meant. Adding on to this rationale, as the "The Truth Project's" website explains, "God, of course, has been edited out of subsequent editions of the dictionary [after 1828]."[62] This fact is used as an example to support the claim that contemporary American culture has publicly rejected God. The lesson also looks at popular notions of truth by interviewing people on the street and contrasting their answers with the biblical concept expressed by evangelical scholars Ravi Zacharias, Os Guinness, and R. C. Sproul.[63]

"The Truth Project" also defends their claims about truth by incorporating philosophy in the second lesson of the series titled "Philosophy and Ethics: Says Who?" According to American Calvinist theologian and Pastor Dr. R.C. Sproul (who is also featured in this lesson), philosophy, is "a scientific quest to discover ultimate reality."[64] From here, Tackett states that this definition "would seem to indicate that philosophical ideas about truth are closely aligned with the biblical definition given in Lesson One:

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] "The Truth Project Lesson Guide: Lesson 2: Philosophy and Ethics: Says Who?" *Media Preference: Text Summary: Focus on Family's The Truth Project,* 2008. http://www.thetruthproject.org/The%20Truth%20Project%20-%20Lesson%20Guide.swf. (2008).

[63] "The Truth Project Lesson Guide: Lesson 1."

[64] "The Truth Project Lesson Guide: Lesson 2."

truth = reality."[65] This is supported by citing definitions and affirmations made by the 1828 edition of Webster's Dictionary: "[philosophy aims] to enlarge our understanding of God" and "true religion and true philosophy must ultimately arrive at the same principle."[66] Lesson two goes on to say that current thought pictures reality as a closed box in which there is no room for anything that cannot be sensually or materially observed.[67] This view is considered problematic since it perceives not only that the lid of the box closed but also that, because of this, God is excluded from the box.[68] When this occurs "philosophy is deprived of a universal reference point and thus crippled in its 'scientific quest for ultimate reality.' As a result, it cannot answer the most basic questions about right and wrong behavior."[69] The thought here is this: by philosophy not having a universal reference point for truth (God), it ceases to function how it originally was supposed to.

The final lesson of "The Truth Project" that will be looked at is "Lesson 5: Science: What is True?" Here, Tackett defines scientific investigation as "the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment" and argues that this scientific investigation process is also a legitimate

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid.

way of determining truth.[70] He claims that because of the complexity of such things as the galaxy or our cells, "there is evidence that the cosmos is the handiwork of an intelligent, rational mind."[71] Tackett continues by stating that "…because of the effects of the fall and the polarizing influence of the Cosmic Battle, man shows a tendency to deny what is plain to the senses and to 'exchange the truth of God for a lie' (Romans 1:25)."[72] This perspective sees the modern scientific worldview as one that excludes God, "thus 'freeing' mankind from accountability to a higher authority."[73] The concern in this lesson is that although certain scientific paradigms have not been proven to be true (Darwinian Theory is used as an example), they have been widely accepted by the scientific community. "The Truth Project" concludes that theories such Darwinism have transformed science from an honest investigation of nature into a medium for propagating a godless philosophy. These understandings, although may be considered by some to be timeless, can be traced back to intellectual roots that were grounded in 19th century thought.

The source of skepticism about philosophy and science is Common Sense Realism (also known as Scottish common sense realism or common sense philosophy), originally a fundamentalist Christian response to and rejection of varies of modernist thinking. This rejection of modernist thought eventually transferred over to the same

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[70] The Truth Project Lesson Guide: Lesson 5: Science: What is True?" *Media Preference: Text Summary: Focus on the Family's Truth Project*, 2008. http://www.thetruthproject.org/The%20Truth%20Project%20-%20Lesson%20Guide.swf. (2008).

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

dismissal of post-modernist thinking. Common sense realism was originally a 19th century school of thought that claimed "that ordinary people could gain a reliable grasp of the world through a responsible use of their senses."[74] Common Sense Realists believed that the individual possessed not only a "moral sense" that allowed a grasp of foundational moral principles, but also that an understanding of "the meaning of the Scriptures was available to the faithful simply by reading the Bible and interpreting it in its plainest sense."[75] This common sense description of reality was also "considered to provide a sure base for the rational and scientific confirmation of the truths of the Bible and the Christian faith."[76] As historian George Marsden states, "In an age that reverenced science, it was essential that this confidence in Scripture not be based on blind faith alone. God's truth was unified, so it was inevitable that science would confirm Scripture."[77] This view of God's truth is still present in evangelicalism today, as common sense realism continues to reverberate through evangelical teachings like "The Truth Project."

Another angle in approaching what is meant by "truth" is explored by Ravi Zacharias,[78] who is featured throughout "The Truth Project." In Lee Stobel's "The Case

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[74] Balmer, *Encyclopedia*, 611.

[75] Ibid.

[76] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925.* (New York: Oxford Press, 1980), 16.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ravi Zacharias received a Master's of Divinity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, a Doctorate of Divinity degree from Houghton College and Tyndale College and Seminary and a Doctor of Laws degree from Asbury College.

for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity," Zacharias

states:

> [All truth] is, by definition, exclusive...if truth does not exclude, then no assertion of a truth claim is being made; it's just an opinion that is being stated. Any time you make a truth claim, you mean something contrary to it is false. Truth excludes its opposite...to deny the exclusive nature of truth is to make a truth claim...[79]

In this understanding, one cannot avoid making statements that are potentially

"offensive" to another when talking about truth, which is often a concern among those

who view truth in a less absolutist way. This idea of truth can also lead to the argument

that anything marked "true" is, by definition, absolutely true. If this is the case, then the

term "absolute truth" no longer is accurate in describing this evangelical viewpoint since

all truth is absolute. Not having the same definitions of words when attempting to talk

about the same issue can create yet another misunderstanding of evangelical thought.

Evangelical scholar Mark Noll agrees: "...the inability to speak at the same time with

common vocabulary both inside and outside the community of faith has been a besetting

weakness of evangelicalism and a particular problem of fundamentalism."[80] This lack of

communication amongst evangelicals and within Christianity is one of the main reasons

why misunderstanding is occurring.

UNDERSTANDING "CHRISTIAN WORLD-VIEW"

"The Truth Project" was created with the mindset that today in the United States,

amid a society that is becoming increasingly secularized, it is essential to develop a

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[79] Lee Strobel. *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity.* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 149-150.

[80] Noll, *Scandal*, 247.

Christian worldview. Because of this, *Focus on the Family* consistently uses research from "The Barna Group" when expressing the urgency and importance of "The Truth Project." In a study[81] by The Barna Group, they claimed that "only 4% of adults have a biblical worldview as the basis of their decision-making" while 7% of Protestants and 2% of adults who attend mainline Protestant churches hold to a biblical worldview.[82] In analyzing these findings, researcher George Barna stated that "The primary reason that people do not act like Jesus is because they do not think like Jesus. Behavior stems from what we think- our attitudes, beliefs, values and opinions."[83] Another Barna study concluded that only 51% of Protestant pastors hold to a biblical worldview, which is defined by Barna "as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it is based upon the Bible, and having a biblical view on six core beliefs: the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize."[84] This definition of a biblical worldview is considered to be essential if one desires a Christian mind.

[81] "The Barna Update: A Biblical Worldview Has a Radical Effect on a Person's Life," *Barna Research.* December 1, 2003.
http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=154.
    The data described was from telephone interviews with a nationwide random sample of 2,033 adults conducted during September through November 2003.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid.

[84] "The Barna Update: Only Half Of Protestant Pastors Have A Biblical Worldview," *Barna Research.* January 12, 2004.
http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=156.
    This data is taken from telephone interviews with a nationwide random sample of 601 Senior Pastors of Protestant churches conducted in November and December 2003.

How The Barna Group understands a Christian worldview also provides more

background to why my senior pastor sees the value in "The Truth Project" for his ELCA

congregation:

> "I see the need...of helping to train and equip the people [of our church] to
> develop a Christian world view, a Christian mind, and to see the Lordship
> of Christ over all of life- not just a narrowly defined 'spiritual'
> realm...They need a Christian world view in order to speak and act
> meaningfully into our secular society"

He quotes Anglican theologian, literary critic, and novelist Harry Blamires in

articulating this point: "There is no longer a Christian Mind...unfortunately, the Christian

mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness

unmatched in Christian history."[85] This "secular drift," in my pastor's words, has

"deeply influenced the Body of Christ in America. We as a church have not escaped its

influence." Because of this drift, he views "The Truth Project" as an essential tool in

opposing the secularism that "has pushed Christianity to the periphery of society." This

viewpoint understands the consequences of secularism to be the erosion of Christian

values and Christian's use of the Bible to fit their lives rather than attempting to center

their lives on teachings in the Bible. Blamires assures readers that "There is still, of

course, a Christian ethic, a Christian practice, and a Christian spirituality," but "there is

no packed contemporary field of discourse in which writers are reflecting christianly on

the modern world and modern man."[86] This viewpoint claims that with a humanistic

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[85] Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1978), 3.

[86] Ibid, 3, 7.

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rather than theological approach to political, social, and cultural issues, the Christian

worldview no longer exists in the public sphere.

Millard Erickson, Professor of Theology at Truett Seminary and Baylor

University, sums up the significance of this evangelical thought on Christian worldview

by stating:

> What we are claiming here is that Christian worldview is not a human
> discovery. It is something that God has revealed, and its fit with the data
> of experience can be seen by one who is willing to enter sympathetically
> into the Christian perspective...The Christian is confident that because she
> or he indeed does have the higher perspective, which God has revealed,
> the cogency of the Christian faith can be seen by those within it.[87]

UNDERSTANDING "POST-MODERNISM"

Post-modernism is another central focus in "The Truth Project." To understand

how post-modernism is viewed, we first need to recognize how they are defining the

term. Millard Erickson, who similarly sees the down falls of post-modernism, can offer

insight on this issue: "Post-modernism challenges the idea that our beliefs are true, in the

sense of being in agreement with an objective world."[88] These challenges come in two

forms: 1) What we perceive and how we judge is determined or strongly influenced by

the culture of which we are a part and 2) Knowledge is the result of what those who have

power determine it to be.[89] "The Truth Project" views these principles of post-

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[87] Millard J. Erickson. *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism.*
(Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2001), 272.

[88] Ibid, 231.

[89] Ibid.

modernism as problematic because they do not cooperate with absolute truth. In the words of my home congregation's pastor: "While "The Truth Project" claims to know certain information is limited by the social, political, economic and cultural systems of our day, truth is not dependent on any of those."[90]

"The Truth Project" characterizes its frustration in post-modernism with the denial that there is an existence of absolute truth. This was expressed earlier in Dr. James Dobson's endorsement of "The Truth Project" and is echoed by the author of multiple editions of "The Universe New Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog," Dr. James W. Sire: "Pluralism and the relativism that has accompanied it have muted the distinctive voices of every point of view."[91] The first concern is the interpretation that pluralism and relativism have denied fundamentalist claims of Christianity by simply rejecting all other forms of thought than their own without providing an opportunity for dialogue (which is potentially what "The Truth Project" does for devoted Christians who do not agree with their statements). The second issue, as i understand it, is that if everything is relative and there are no absolutes, then all points of view are valid, which goes against what God reveals to us in Scripture. Through the rejection of absolute truth, there is a fear that post-modernism ultimately dismisses that God has a plan and purpose for our lives and for the world. The relativism embedded in post-modernism therefore questions the authority of the Bible. When Biblical authority is questioned, doubt arises that Scripture is the Word of God. If the Bible is not the Word of God, then we cannot know for sure that the truth (assuming there is only one truth) is within its pages. Instead, the truth

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[91] James W. Sire. *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog, Third Edition.* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 9.

would have been dictated by human beings, who are (according to the fall in Genesis 3),

by nature, flawed. The thought is that individuals are too inconsistent to convey God-

sized truth without direct guidance from God and without a consistent, universal truth;

understanding God is left in the hands of humans. This lineage of thought is part of

common sense realism that originally was in response to the Enlightenment era which

produced modernism (and led to post-modernist thought).

In the same way that "evangelical Christianity" is too diverse of a term to limit to

a single definition, "post-modernism" also runs into the same difficulty. The *Dictionary*

*of American History* narrows down what this broad term refers to: "Impermanence,

pluralism, dissolution, and the decay of authority constituted thematic emphases in the

intellectual dimensions of postmodernism."[92] Example of this form of thought: literary

and intellectual texts (like the Bible) will always yield both multiple and contradictory

meanings under close examination.[93] If this is true, these texts "deconstruct" themselves

and rather than producing truth systems, "they confront us only with an endless chain of

signifiers. Meaning always recedes, and eludes the reader."[94] The inability to

systematically define meaning is frustrating for those who actively reject post-modern

thought. More to the point, those who view the Bible in literalistic terms struggle to

reconcile their understanding of Scripture with a form of thought that appears to question

the basic foundations of God.

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[92] J. David Hoeveler, "Postmodern Intellect," Stanley I. Kutler (ed.), *Dictionary of American History (Third Edition): Volume 6.* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 429.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

There have also been many Christian scholars, pastors and activists during and after the Enlightenment era have embraced post-modernism (and modernism before it) since they have often viewed it as exploring "the truth of God without seeking to protect God from the disturbance of new insights."[95] These "new insights" that post-modernism has brought to the table are viewed as creating a more mature Christian faith rather than a form of thought that rejects Christian faith. For instance, the mindset of absolute truth does not leave any room for truth to be found any other source except the Bible. This "right or wrong" mentality is indirectly stating that God has only revealed truth to the limited amount of individuals who wrote the Bible and therefore other writings that are inspired by God (like the confessions of the Lutheran Church found in *The Book of Concord*) are, ultimately, false since they are not true. This would mean that the basic convictions of the Lutheran Church (and many other denominations of Christianity) would have to be considered false. As seen in this situation, believing in absolute truth is not only is exclusive towards many forms of Christian thought, but also puts a limit on God's power to be able to work in the hearts and minds of individuals today. Another question arises in light of absolute truth in the context of reality: if truth corresponds to reality (as is stated in "The Truth Project") and an individual has limited information on what is real, how can the truth be complete? These critiques of absolute truth are important to wrestle with before one agrees with any single definition of truth, Christian worldview, or postmodernism.

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[95] John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile.* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), xix.

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Before digging into the specific differences of evangelical thought in "The Truth Project" and the ELCA, we will briefly discuss the potential benefits and problems of a teaching tool like "The Truth Project." One of the potential problems with "The Truth Project" is that these tough questions about Christianity are being addressed from one theological and intellectual point of view and are being displayed in a way that suggests they are the only logical and correct answer. At the same time, these DVDs provide people who do not have the time or money with researched reasons to believe in what they consider to be the God's revealed truth.

"The Truth Project" also provides something to its viewers that people are always seeking after, answers. In a media-driven society that centers around the clock, time is of the utmost value. Since most people can only donate a couple hours a week from their hectic schedules, the hour time slot that each lesson of "The Truth Project" fills this opening well. Combined with the appealing format of the DVD series (the trailer plays like a popular movie preview), easy-to-commit-to hour lesson each week, and its ability to answer deep Christian questions after four months; its no wonder why "The Truth Project" is catered perfectly for any congregation. All of this could be considered a benefit and a problem of the DVD series. "The Truth Project's" relevance and accessibility is definitely a plus for the viewers. At the same time, it is possible to get caught up in the hoopla of this visually attractive series and accept whatever is being articulated because of its appeal to the senses. After expressing all of the attractions to "The Truth Project," it is important to note that even though my congregation has appeared to support the viewing of this series, not everybody has agreed with the statements made by Dr. Tackett and the featured theologians and scholars. Many

attendees simply watch the viewpoint and draw their own conclusions. Others may go just to be an active member of the church. No matter why people show up at my church to watch weekly lessons of "The Truth Project," the main point is that this evangelical viewpoint is being observed.

### Comparing Evangelical Thought: "The Truth Project" and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

The comparison between evangelical thought in the ELCA and "The Truth Project" is important to discuss because both are grouped into the category of evangelical, even though their missions and viewpoints often do not express the same concerns. Finding out the differences and similarities between how each understands "evangelical" will allow for an opportunity to further explore how unity can be constructed amongst both camps of Christian thought.

Under the heading "How do Lutherans Look upon the Bible," the ELCA website states "While Lutherans recognize differences in the way the Bible should be studied and interpreted, it is accepted as the primary and authoritative witness to the church's faith."[96] The official confession of faith of the ELCA affirms "This Church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life."[97] Similarly, *Focus on the Family's* statement of faith also recognizes the Bible to be the inspired and

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[96] "How do Lutherans Look upon the Bible." *Essential Questions: Christianity and Lutheranism.* http://www.elca.org/communication/brief.html#thebible. (2008)

[97] "Statements of Belief: ELCA Confession of Faith." *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.* http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Statements-of-Belief/ELCA-Confession-of-Faith.aspx. (2008).

authoritative Word of God, but also includes that they view Scripture as infallible.[98]

Infallibility states that Scripture is for soteric (salvation) knowledge and is revealed truth

offered to make one "wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15, AV).[99] Specifically, *Focus on*

*the Family* subscribes to essentialist infallibility, which looks at Scripture as its own

interpreter.[100]

Now we will turn to the common threads between *Focus on the Family's* "The

Truth Project" and ELCA evangelicals. Both the *Focus on the Family* and the ELCA

faith statements believe in a triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Both faith

statements also believe that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative "Word of God."

These may seem like "small" commonalities, but ultimately, do not "small" actions

actually open the door for larger opportunities?

**"The Truth Project" and ELCA: Two Attempts to Create Christian Unity**

While evangelical diversity is evident when comparing "The Truth Project" and

the ELCA, both have attempted to unite Christians. Beginning with "The Truth Project,"

it is important to clarify and differentiate between what groups are or are not being united

because of this DVD series. So, who is "The Truth Project" attempting to unite-

Christians in general or a specific group of Christians? Does this process involve uniting

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[98] "What is the statement of faith for Focus on the Family's The Truth Project®?" *Focus on the Family*. 1999-2008. http://family.custhelp.com/cgi-bin/family.cfg/php/enduser/std_adp.php?p_faqid=25114. (2008).

*Focus on the Family's* statement of faith will be used when comparing "The Truth Project" and ELCA for two reasons. One, "The Truth Project" does not have an official statement of faith; and two, since "The Truth Project" is an entity of *Focus on the Family*, it is logical to suggest that they would have aligning faith statements.

[99] Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith*, 12.

[100] Ibid, 14

proposal stated that the Christian Churches Together purpose is "to enable churches and national Christian organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness in the world."[107] The CCT was agreed upon on January 29, 2003, at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, California) by forty-six national church leaders who represented five historical families: Evangelical/Pentecostal, Historic Protestant, Orthodox, Racial/Ethnic, and Roman Catholic.[108]

The ELCA's ecumenical vision states:

"The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is committed to fostering unity between the children of God for the sake of the world. The 'ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations' is responsible for encouraging the activity of ecumenical life in the ELCA, and for enhancing the public commitments of this church in Lutheran, ecumenical, and interfaith discussions."[109]

Attempting to understand another Christian viewpoint starts with an open mind willing to learn from one another. For instance, evangelical scholar Mark Noll encourages evangelicals to look toward Lutherans for depth in theological insight: "...with Luther's belief that a Christian was *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time a justified saint and sinner), could show evangelicals the virtue of looking at problems form several different points of view.[110] Not viewing Christian thought from all angles is limiting the power of God. If God provides a medium for one to grow in their

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[107] Ibid.

[108] Ibid.

[109] "Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations," *Churchwide Organization: Evangelical Lutheran Church of America,* 2008. http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations.aspx. (2008).

[110] Noll, *Scandal,* 246.

relationship with the Creator, than that must be acknowledged and explored. Christian

thought is not exclusive to a single form interpretation. This is why denominations were

formed- not to rally around an individual who thinks they are right about their views of

God, but to humbly draw closer to a mysterious and loving God.

## Conclusion: A Call for Christian Unity

Early 20th Century scholar and defender of orthodox Christianity, J. Gresham

Machen states:

> ...the narrow man is the man who rejects the other man's convictions
> without first endeavoring to understand them, the man who makes no
> effort to look at things from the other man's point of view.[111]

Although Machen is writing in opposition to combining liberalism and

Christianity, he still sees a need to understand "the other's" perspective of Christian

thought. Later in the same section, Gresham claims that "Nothing engenders strife so

much as a forced unity...of those who disagree fundamentally in aim."[112] So how can an

agreed upon Christian unity occur when there are fundamental differences in belief?

These different beliefs often are made public in the political realm. One common

stereotype of evangelicals is that their political focus is directed towards traditionally

"conservative" subjects like abortion and stem cell research. Liberal *New York Times*

editorialist Nicholas D. Kristof argues that this old-fashioned assumption is not telling the

real story: "Today, many evangelicals are powerful internationalists and humanitarians-

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[111] J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1923), 160.

[112] Ibid, 167.

and liberals haven't awakened to the transformation."[113] Reverend Rick Warren, the best-selling author of "The Purpose Driven Life" is a prime example of this shift of focus among evangelicals. Warren states: "Almost all of my work is in the third world. I couldn't care less about politics, the culture wars. My only interest is to get people to care about Darfurs and Rwandas."[114] Maybe evangelicals (conservative or not) and "liberal" Christians have a more common mission in the world then they would like to admit. Although this by no means solves the unification problem between evangelicals and "liberal" Christians, it is an important step towards Christian unity.

Since there has not been an agreed upon definition of "evangelical," it appears that unity among evangelicals, as well as other Christians will have to start with smaller steps than I originally would had hoped. These "smaller" steps towards Christian unity have already been taking place within various Christian denominations and forms of thought. For instance, uniting evangelicalism has been an active goal of Fuller Seminary since they were founded in 1948. The seminary has remarkably been able to achieve evangelical ecumenicity by keeping itself open to two evangelical traditions: The Reformed and the pentecostal.[115] Understanding how difficult it has been to keeping this alliance intact among a specific group of evangelicals at Fuller puts in perspective just how hard it is be to unite non-denominational evangelicals with ELCA evangelicals, let alone the seemingly impossible task of a unifying all Christians. With this said, there

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[113] Nicholas D. Kristof. "Evangelicals a Liberal Can Love." *The New York Times.* (February 3, 2008).

[114] Ibid.

[115] Marsden, *Reforming*, 296.

have been many significant attempts (successful and unsuccessful) to unite Christians by focusing on similarities.

In the last 30 years, there have been many faithful attempts by scholars to unify evangelical Christians. In 1981, Presbyterian Dr. Richard G. Hutcheson, Jr. wrote about discovering unity through commonalities between mainline churches and evangelicals. Twelve years later, Professor Gabriel Fackre explored unity amongst ecumenical and evangelical Christians. These are just two examples of a similar evangelical Christian concern centered on unification. Since then, the ELCA has visually accomplished the most in the name of Christian unity.

The senior pastor in my home congregation views unity among Christians in this way:

> "I believe Christian unity already exists and has been given by God. The church universal is One Church right now throughout the world. God creates the Church and sustains the Church and is One in Him. External unity of the church is something that we should work toward and welcome but is not essential. Perhaps it is just as great a witness that in the midst of differences the world nevertheless sees true believers loving one another."

The intern pastor in the same church who is currently attending Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, adds his ideas on the discussion of Christian unity:

> I'm not sure that Christian unity can be formed other than through a general commitment to the basic faith tenets that unite us. But it is also something that should be continually brought up because the further separation occurs; the less willingness there is to see value and truth in other denominations or churches."

Both hold different perspective of unity, but with one common thread of thought: love must win out among believers. Only when we as Christians can humble ourselves in our opinions and reconcile with the side of Christian thought that we disagree with, can we truly begin to form Christian unity. This unity need not be physical as much as it

needs to be with loving with the mind that God gave us. When Christians can practice and pray together- that is unity. When one's heart is focused on loving God through the faithfully living how the Scripture compels us to live- that is unity. Neither "The Truth Project" nor the ELCA orchestrate a more superior version of Christian unity. Both instead provide their own ways in promoting unification among Christians.

Once we release the firm grasp on our convictions that the other side is wrong, dialogue can finally occur. When dialogue happens, we better understand each other's Christian views and once we understand these views, there creates an opportunity for fear to melt away. Christians do not all need to believe in the same convictions, but they need to affirm not only that certain convictions exist, but that these convictions have led to the individual seeking after loving and serving God and one another. This raises one last question: how will you, the reader, approach various evangelical thoughts in the name of Christian unity?

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