Judging from the amount of recent literature attentive to evangelical ecclesiology, it would appear that the answer to the title of this review essay should be affirmative. At least there is a small body of ecclesiological reflection beginning to develop in the evangelical world. That is a good thing. One longs for the time when every writer on the subject will no longer feel obligated to begin their work with sentences such as, “The idea of the church did not fare well in twentieth-century evangelicalism” (Phillips, Ryken, and Dever, preface), or, more gently, “When one thinks about evangelicals and what they hold dear, one would be forgiven for not thinking immediately of the church” (Bruce Hindmarsh, in the Stackhouse volume). Yet, though the author of the second quotation provides a very sympathetic and helpful historical introduction to the subject, he also concludes that there is something “profoundly oxymoronic, or at least paradoxical, in the way evangelicals have proclaimed and appreciated the spiritual unity of all those who are truly ‘born again’ while at the same time have so often separated from one another in practice” (Stackhouse, 15).

Evangelicals, so Stackhouse suggests, “have implied an ecclesiology more than we have articulated one.” While evangelicals have been very busy planting churches, creating parachurch organizations, using the mass media, forming political action groups, and so on, what has not happened, according to Stackhouse, is serious reflection on these practices or any attempt “to try make some theological sense of them all” (9-10). Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion is a collection of essays, the fruit of a 2002 conference at Regent College,
Vancouver, B.C., Canada. Divided into four parts, the essays cover evangelical church history, programmatic proposals for an evangelical ecclesiology, essays on the defining characteristics of evangelical ecclesiology, and two brief overview responses. In what follows, I shall highlight key points with intensive commentary rather than summarize extensively.

The opening essay by Regent College’s own Bruce Hindmarsh, from which the title of this review is borrowed, utilizes the history of evangelical Christianity from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the present to set forth the case that subordinating church order to evangelical piety undermined its own goal of renewing and unifying the church. Differences in ecclesiology—sacraments, church order—had of course been one of the contributing causes of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. With the unity of Christendom shattered and the church facing the challenge of modern Enlightenment thinking on religious liberty and toleration (John Locke), a new form of church life took hold. In Hindmarsh’s words: “Modern evangelicalism arose in a new world with an appreciation for political liberty and a strong folk memory of religious intolerance, violence and war in the recent past. And its understanding of the church very much reflected these new conditions” (22). Specifically, evangelical Christianity, under Pietists such as the Lutheran Spener (and later the Anglicans Wesley and Whitefield) was more of a renewal and revival movement within established churches than a new form of church, though revival groups did, of course, later take on new ecclesial forms such as Methodism. Still, the practice of conventical Christianity as ecclesioae in ecclesia meant that genuine religious piety could be considered apart from or at least next to formal, institutionalized church life. In addition, traveling pious missionary movements such as the Moravians ensured that this evangelical ideal would be carried over from Europe to Great Britain and finally to the New World.

With the increased capacity for travel and communication available in the late-seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, renewal and revival evangelical Christianity swept through the Christian world, notably at key moments such as the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. Hindmarsh traces this phenomenon and notes that the major ecclesiastical effect was that evangelical awakening “consistently overflowed the banks of traditional, established church order. . . . As the experience of evangelical awakening persistently crisscrossed the boundaries of nations and churches, men and women increasingly identified less with their churches and more with their local evangelical fellowships and with the international evangelical community” (30).

The result of this changed ecclesiological consciousness had, so Hindmarsh contends, a tragic consequence. No distinctively evangelical church polity exists, in part because evangelicals came to consider external ecclesiastical forms of any kind, including sacraments, as unimportant if not inimical to evangelical piety. The “mystical church”—the body of those who believe in Jesus, “where two or three are gathered in his name,”—is all that matters. True reli-
igion is inward, not external. Though this was believed to be the new route to the unity of all true believers—a way of joining together in a kind of mere Christianity all pious, evangelical Christians in formally Christian but spiritually dead institutions—evangelicals, in fact, remained doggedly separatist. Promoted as the means of uniting all true believers, evangelical piety in effect became the source of additional separation and division. That is its great tragedy. Unlike Roman Catholicism, for example, evangelical Christianity in North America has no institutional weight. The reason for this is obvious: There is no evangelical church polity. In Hindmarsh’s words, “Early modern evangelicalism displayed an unprecedented transdenominational and international ecclesial consciousness that was characterized by an unparalleled subordination of church order to evangelical piety” (15).

After the diagnosis given in the opening essay, much of the remainder of this volume is dedicated to providing remedies. The essay by Kerry Dearborn of Seattle Pacific University, “Recovering a Trinitarian and Sacramental Ecclesiology,” sets forth Celtic Christianity as a model for enriching evangelical spirituality with its “ecclesial gifts of trinitarian identity, sacramental vision, liturgical rhythm, and missiological boldness and humility” (67). This essay is a challenge for evangelicals, foreign to their North American experience, challenging and provoking, yet also at the same time delighting and blessing the willing and receptive reader. The two programmatic essays, one by Asbury Seminary’s Howard Snyder (“The Marks of Evangelical Ecclesiology”) and the other by George Hunsberger of Western Seminary (“Evangelical Conversion Toward a Missional Ecclesiology”), are more familiar and conventional and thus are likely more accessible to contemporary evangelicals. Nonetheless, in the judgment of this writer, they are in fact more radical and removed from the tradition of catholic (small c!) ecclesiology and for that reason somewhat problematic.

The line of argument, taken in somewhat different directions in the two essays, is the now-familiar contention that the classic creedal attributes of the church—one, holy, catholic, apostolic—in combination with the Reformation marks—proclamation, sacraments, discipline—are no longer adequate in our postmodern age. These defining characteristics, so it is alleged, arose in the context of Christendom not so much to define the church but “to distinguish the true from the false church” (Hunsberger, 107), or in Snyder’s more prejudicial description (83), “as a test to exclude Christians who understood the church differently.” Furthermore, what is said to be missing in this traditional ecclesiology is the missional character of the church as a body sent out to bear witness to the reign of Christ. Neither the actual missionary activity of the magisterial church of the Reformation nor “the emergence of missionary societies and denominational missionary sending agencies [that] added foreign missions to the task of the church” led to “a recovery of the church’s image of itself as essentially missionary. Missions were sent out by and from the church to newly contacted areas of the world, but in a Christendom-shaped West it was not generally a part of the church’s thinking to see itself as a distinct commu-
nity that itself was sent by God in its social arena. Too fused were the sinews of church and society for such a thing to be seen” (Hunsberger, 108).

In addition, according to Hunsberger, the influence of Enlightenment thought, particularly the emphasis on the individual person, is the “Achilles heel” of American evangelicalism (118). By emphasizing *personal* conversion, faith, and experience, evangelicalism plays into the consumerist and consumptive excesses of North American society and fails to bear counter-cultural testimony to the reign of God in Christ and act as a participant in the *missio Dei.* Hunsberger pleads for a more transformative missional ecclesiology that does not see conversion primarily as that of individual persons but “of working for justice and peace” (124). “The challenge for evangelicalism is to embrace a wider range of formative biblical visions and to embody a corporate lifestyle beyond personal morality” (125). Concretely, this means that the North American missional church will have to become more receptive to learning from cross-cultural encounters; not just as transmitters of the gospel message to others but as receptors living in a post-Christian culture and society (127). The church, in sum, must rethink its identity by replacing its narrow personal, ecclesiocentric vision with a new theocentric and cosmic vision of the *missio Dei.* In this new missional understanding of the church, it sees itself not as a “place where certain things happen” but as “a body of people sent on a mission—the mission to represent the reign of God” (109). Churches, in Snyder’s terms, “must be authentic, visible signs of God’s reign” (103).

There is much in these two essays that is stimulating and provocative and that merits attention. While Snyder shares with Hunsberger the premise that traditional Reformation ecclesiology is inadequate because of the historical and sociopolitical context in which it arose, he sets forth a sociological missional model in a unique way by emphasizing the ambiguity of the marks and insisting that unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity need to be “balanced” with a matching, correlative emphasis on diversity; the charismatic; the local; and the prophetic, respectively. Though his own analysis suffers from the ambiguity of conflating and confusing the church’s attributes with its marks, Snyder illustrates well the actual complex diversity of evangelical ecclesiology and how difficult it is to develop a more unified approach.

The basic premise of the proposed missional ecclesiology is, so it seems to me, debatable. Is it the case, for example, that the classic attributes and marks of the church are really so dependent upon and restrictedly appropriate to a Christendom cultural mindset? To be sure, Article 29 of the Belgic Confession, for example, does speak of *the* “true and false church” and uses the marks to distance the true from the false church. Why, however, should this be considered a Christendom pattern, particularly because, we must recall, the author of the Belgic Confession was martyred for his faith? Is it not the case that perhaps especially now, with the pluralistic proliferation of Protestant sects and churches, that the criteria of true and false as judged by fidelity to Scripture in proclamation, sacraments, and disciplining remains a useful and necessary cri-
terion for any biblical ecclesiology? Proclaiming the gospel, celebrating the sacraments and disciplining are precisely what our Lord commanded his disciples to do. To the degree that the church is faithful to this task it can be said to be the body of Christ, the new people of God.

Nor is it clear that the classic attributes are somehow tied to a Christendom-shaped ecclesiology. In fact, when one considers fine treatments of the attributes such as the fifth essay in the Stackhouse volume by Episcopalian theologian Edith M. Humphrey, “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic: Awaiting the Redemption of our Body,” as well as the collection of essays by Presbyterian pastors Philips and Ryken, and Baptist pastor Dever, it is fair to ask whether the shift to a missional ecclesiology in fact sidesteps key issues or at least answers them only indirectly. The same point applies to the fine essay by Baylor’s Roger Olsen in Evangelical Ecclesiology, “Free Church Ecclesiology and Evangelical Spirituality,” because a free church ecclesiology is clearly not rooted in Constantinian ways of thinking about church and society. In this essay, Olsen defends the “modest” thesis that “free church ecclesiology, properly understood, is more compatible with the evangelical Protestant ethos and spirituality, properly understood, than its alternatives” (162). Olsen calls attention to the inherent difficulties in defining evangelicalism (hence his insistence on “properly understood”), himself settling for a combination of commitment to the Reformation’s doctrinally oriented solas—gratia et fides, scripture—along with the “experiential ideal of what has been called conversionist piety, which arose especially among the continental Pieties and revivalists of the Great Awakenings” (165). Olsen calls this a “bipolar center” of a transdenominational and multidenominational “large tent (metaphorically speaking), featuring two main characteristics: commitment to general Protestant orthodoxy (especially the authority of Scripture and the atoning death of Christ) and the experience of conversion to Christ by repentance and faith, resulting in justification, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, and an intimate personal relationship with Christ marked by prayer, holiness of life, worship of God, and active participation in the church of God’s people” (165).

Olsen, quite justifiably in my opinion, challenges the notion that free churches lack an ecclesiology, either by rejecting or neglecting it. His rejoinder is fitting: “That’s like someone who values baroque architecture saying to a person who lives in a Frank Lloyd Wright house, ‘But your house doesn’t have architecture’” (162). He also insists, again quite rightly, that though the strongly personal character of evangelical piety may, especially in “our hyper-individualistic American culture (especially in the United States),” deteriorate into individualism, “their individualism is not the individualism of the Enlightenment, as some critics believe, but the strong belief in the priesthood of all believers that energized the Protestant Reformation” (170). Olsen’s account is thus a description “of the essence of evangelicalism [that has] an irreducibly individual—not individualistic or autonomous—element at its core; to be evangelical is to have a relationship with God marked by mediated immediacy. Convensional piety may
begin with a sacramental experience of God’s grace (which is something debated among evangelicals), but it requires a personal, I-Thou encounter with God at some time after that. Additionally, that encounter cannot be automatic or wholly mediated; it must include a conscious, wiling, responsible response to the divine initiative that cannot be accomplished for a person. The person must respond for himself or herself” (166).

This evangelical piety is very distrustful of all hierarchies in the church and leads naturally to a voluntarist and congregational polity as well as historical opposition to all creedalism and formalism in worship. It is also not subject to the critique raised by Snyder about the traditional marks of the church when he claimed that they arose “as a test to exclude Christians who understood the church differently.” Though doctrine and experience are important in evangelical piety, Olsen insists, “I have no interest in boundary setting and patrolling. When it comes to evangelical identity, I believe that ecclesiology and especially polity are secondary to the gospel itself. However, I do suspect that free-church ecclesiology is more conducive to life centered on the gospel—that is, evangelical spirituality—than alternative visions of the church and churchly practices. That is my modest claim.” (162).

Olsen is not only respectful of the classic, creedal attributes but insists: “Free churches do affirm that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic” (172). Again, justifiably, Olsen notes that in practice the free churches strive for and often achieve an apostolic authenticity that gives them the mark of a true church while at the same time these marks may be absent in some churches claiming historic episcopacy and apostolic succession. The freedom of this tradition, in fact, opens it up to possibilities of renewal that are absent in more structured bodies. “Free church ecclesiology does not include a necessary polity, but it does tend toward congregationalism because of its perceived consistency with the priesthood of all believers and voluntarism and because of the perceived dangers of other polities, especially hierarchical ones, which have historically seemed to quench the spirit of renewal” (173). It may be fair to say that, while Olsen and the free-church tradition affirm the four attributes of the church, the emphasis is clearly on the attribute of holiness. By contrast, the missional-church emphasis discussed earlier could be said to actually redefine the church in terms of one dimension of one of the attributes, namely apostolicity in the sense of being sent.

If that summary is correct—missional ecclesiology redefines the church in terms of its being sent as the representative or agent of the missio Dei, the reign of Christ—then it must face some important questions. The attributes cannot so neatly be bypassed or redefined without the nature of the church itself being changed. Austin Seminary’s Michael Jinkins, in “The ‘Gift’ of the Church: Ecclesia Crucis, Peccatrix Maxima, and the Missio Dei” (Stackhouse, 179-209), argues strongly against a strictly voluntarist understanding of the church—the idea that the Christian faith is a chosen faith. In particular, he takes issue with Karl Barth’s notion that the first step in Christian discipleship takes place in
baptism, which Barth defines as follows: “which by his own decision is requested of the community and which is administered by the community, as the binding confession of his obedience, conversion and hope, made in prayer for God’s grace, wherein he honours the freedom of this grace.” While respecting this adult-baptism position, Jinkins notes that “it tends to shift both one’s theological emphasis and ecclesiological attention from the faithfulness and freedom of God to one’s own faith and freedom.” By contrast, he posits a different understanding of baptism namely that “when we are baptized, our baptism is wrapped by the Holy Spirit in the baptism of Jesus Christ, in whom and by whom, with whom and through whom we are called by God and that Christ’s baptism sweeps over our own baptisms and sweeps us up in the indelible, sacramental sign of God’s act of pure, unmerited grace” (184). While the church as a voluntary association has its strengths, the alternative must not be overlooked. “The church as a gathered body, by contrast, represents a clear alternative of ecclesiological perspective, perhaps complementary, perhaps competing, in which belief in God’s faithfulness and freedom is understood to be expressed through the community’s inclusion of those (often, but not always, children) who have not yet recognized the gospel or made it their own by faith.” While the voluntary-associational model “tends to emphasize transformation over formation,” the gathered-body model “tends to understand transformation as a product of formation” (184).

The problem with ecclesiologies that begin with individuals choosing for God and then voluntarily joining together, according to Jinkins, is that they are “built on the shifting sand of human frailty and variability.” Unity, holiness, catholicity, and fidelity to scripture cannot be maintained on that weak reed. By contrast, if the church is a gathered body because its very existence is grounded on the gift of grace and maintained by the Holy Spirit’s presence, then we can have some confidence that we are members of Christ’s own body. Jinkins quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote, “Our faith must become fully aware of the magnitude of this gift.” We belong to Christ—that is the church’s confession. Paraphrasing the Heidelberg Catechism: “The church belongs body and soul, in life and in death not to itself but to our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. The church, its salvation won, its debts paid, freed from the dominion of Satan, belongs to God in Christ. And we belong to God in Christ here and now as members of Christ’s body, the church” (188).

It is here that all discussion about the church’s identity must begin. The attributes of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity are articles of faith; they express what the church believes about itself as the body of Christ. It is where Humphrey begins her essay on the attributes, and it is also where Philips, Ryken, and Dever begin. From there, it is possible to address matters of authority, truth and heresy, discipleship, and mission. It is here that we must face the fact that, as church, “we are not as we should be” (Humphrey, 151). It is here that we learn about unity and division and about how to distinguish matters of primary and essential doctrine from secondary concerns. On this score, Philips
reminds us that evangelical unity is possible even when there are differences about baptism, “so long as we agree on the content and centrality of the gospel” (35). “What we must avoid,” he insists, “is the party spirit that makes the gospel secondary to other concerns,” though he also notes that this is a major challenge (35). Here, we discover how church members cannot help but be “wounded lovers” because “the sins of the church have a way of scarring our affections.” Here, we may be led to conclude: “I love the church, but it’s not always easy to love” (47).

The Philips, Ryken, and Dever volume and Humphrey’s essay are realistic in every sense. Not only is the real, everyday, fallible, sinful church acknowledged in love, but its ultimate reality as the body of Christ, as a matter of faith not sight, is the basis of the pastorally thoughtful observations offered. In Humphrey’s case, the two major challenges she poses to evangelical ecclesiology is the claim that true unity in the church is a matter of “nuanced hierarchy-with-mutuality” (141), and her insistence that the “sacraments are the life of the church” (152). Both claims are rooted in Christ’s own pattern “who was rich and became poor for us” and thus became the model of a Spirit-filled life in which we delight to glorify others. This is “the creative dance by which we show... our nature as God’s very children” (142)—a reality we celebrate when we participate our Lord’s dying and rising in baptism and proclaim his death and resurrection in the Eucharist until he returns.

The question I would to pose to missional ecclesiology is whether its redefinition of the church in terms of apostolicity as sentness does not bypass this identity question. Does missional ecclesiology possibly make the mistake of conceiving the church as sent without first properly addressing the question of how the sent church is gathered and what the sent church really is? Perhaps it is helpful to focus this set of concerns by considering how Hunsberger seeks to revision the evangelical understanding of biblical authority. He adopts Lesslie Newbigin’s emphasis on narrative authority where the Bible functions “neither [as] a portrait of an ideal culture not a source for disembodied principles but a revelation of the meaning and destiny of the world” (129). This requires a new hermeneutic—that of engaging the biblical text. We must not try to find its meaning in its original setting and then apply it to the contemporary one, for that is to impose our own judgment on the text: “It leaves us largely in charge of the transaction” (130). We need to adopt a new understanding of knowledge and truth. “Truth is fundamentally personal. In other words, it is a person, Jesus. Whatever we discern of that truth may and should approximate it and be true to it. But our knowing is not truth in the same way that Jesus is the truth.” A personal and narrative understanding of truth is practical—it is lived truth. Hunsberger cites, with approval, Philip Kenneson’s controversial claim, “There’s no such thing as objective truth, and it’s a good thing too.” Without the cross and resurrection becoming storied or embodied in actual living communities, according to Hunsberger, “the atonement is left hanging in midair” (131).
Now, I happen to be very appreciative of the contributions of narrative the-
ology in enriching our understanding of Scripture and biblical truth. At the
same time, I am also acutely aware of the pitfalls in the recent rediscovery of
narrative. Wolfhart Pannenberg summed this up neatly in a lecture given at
Western Theological Seminary over a decade ago. “The problem with the term
‘story’ is that it obfuscates the truth question, and I suspect that the term story
is so popular precisely because it allows one to slide over the truth question.
The story of Jesus Christ has to be history, not in all its details, but in its core, if
the Christian faith is to continue.”¹ The proponents of missional ecclesiology
need to consider whether their zeal for a postmodern ecclesiology might be
unwittingly undercutting the fundamental realism of the gospel itself. Here, I
would again underscore my previous comments about the appropriate realism
of other essays in the Stackhouse volume.

Is “evangelical ecclesiology” then an oxymoron? There obviously is an unfin-
ished agenda for evangelical ecclesiastics and theologians; the tensions in this
area are quite apparent in the Stackhouse volume. Yet, the good news is that
these matters are now openly on the table for discussion. Conferences such as
the Regent gathering of 2002 as well as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals
in Philadelphia during April 2003, which was the occasion for the Philips,
Ryken, and Dever meditations, are important and welcome events for the well
being—the unity—of the evangelical, holy, catholic and apostolic church in
North America.

Having considered one important volume of essays in some detail, are we
any closer to getting a bead on what the real problem of evangelical ecclesiol-
ogy might be and where future reflections and work need to be done? Is there
an identifiable weakness that can be diagnosed and for which a remedy might
be suggested? Do the evangelical propensities for experience over church
order, for practical application over doctrine and teaching, for the pragmatism
of revivalism over the careful articulation of theology have a common thread?

Perhaps. If there is a uniting feature in the various branches of contempo-
rary North American evangelicalism, it might be the consistent indifference to
or even antipathy toward the broader Christian tradition, both geographically
and historically. In classic terms, evangelicalism fails to take seriously the
catholicity of the church. To address that deficiency, I heartily recommend pay-
ing attention to Fuller theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen’s An Introduction to
Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives. Kärkkäinen properly
locates ecclesiology systematically within the arena of pneumatology and then
provides clear, concise summaries of the major traditional ecclesiologies—
Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Free Church,
Pentecostal, charismatic, and ecumenical. The next section of the book con-
siders key contemporary systematic theologians and their treatment of the

church, including John Zizioulos, Hans Küng, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, James McClendon, and Lesslie Newbigin. The third part examines contextual ecclesiologies including the Non-Church Movement in Asia, the Base Ecclesial Communities of Latin America, the feminist church, the African Independent Churches, and the Shepherding Movement. Concluding chapters wrestle with the “world church” and the postmodern church. This volume is an introduction. One should not go to it and expect to find full treatment of questions about the marks or about Christian ministry. What it intends to do and does well is provide an overview of the rich variety of answers to the question, “What makes the church the church.” That is a place from which evangelicals, too, must start, necessarily both as an exercise in historical and theological understanding and in humility.

If any reinforcement is needed for the argument that evangelicals need first of all to become more aware of the Christian tradition’s own rich resources in ecclesiological reflection and practice, it is readily available in Drew University Methodist theologian Thomas C. Oden’s The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity. This volume sat on my desk for some time before I read it. Having appreciated Oden’s earlier works—Agenda for Theology: Recovering Christian Roots (1979), After Modernity... What? (1989), and Requiem: A Lament in Three Movements (1995), I was not sure if The Rebirth of Orthodoxy would be all that different. I should have known better. Whereas the previous volumes were more in the nature of a jeremiad directed at the rootlessness of modern liberal theology and a plea to recover the riches of the tradition, The Rebirth of Orthodoxy is a hopeful and challenging account of renewal that is in fact actually taking place in the Christian world, a renewal of vibrant Christian orthodoxy that provides hope because it is an alternative to the politicized modernism of so much contemporary Christianity, also in the evangelical world. As with Pope John Paul II in his encyclical Tertio Millennio Adveniente (“On the Coming of the Third Millennium,” 2000), Oden not only sees numerous positive signs that a new consensual biblically rooted Christian faith is prospering but also sets forth a vision of Christian proclamation and evangelization for the third millennium that honors and celebrates the consensual tradition. Secularism is hopeless; it has helped the modern world achieve great prosperity and licensed liberty but not freedom because it destroyed meaning for human beings.

Postmodernism is secularism’s death throes; the church must not accommodate itself to postmodern nihilism and secularism but confront it with the joyous proclamation of the gospel. Where the church gives up is passion for novelty and relevance and returns to the classic Christian disciplines and prayer, fasting, witness, and a liturgically shaped cross-bearing obedience, it will be reborn. According to Oden, it is already being reborn; we need to open our spiritual eyes and unstop our spiritual ears and see and hear the Holy Spirit doing mighty things.

Oden’s vision is different from that of the missional church movement. For reasons already indicated in the essay above, my sympathies are clearly with
Oden. I also find further confirmation in the last book under review in this essay, D. G. Hart’s cheeky tract, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. Hart’s thesis is unambiguous: “Evangelicalism needs to be relinquished as a religious identity because it does not exist” (16). Evangelicalism, he argues, is a construction of historians and academic observers who were uncomfortable about the negativities of fundamentalism and sought an identity that retained a clear distinction from liberal, modernist Christianity along with a personal conversionist piety. In the second half of the twentieth century, many parachurch organizations arose that were dedicated to maintaining both conservative Christian doctrine and evangelistic zeal while also being socially engaged and active in culture. Hart judges that “scholars and pundits have done more to keep evangelicalism alive than have church members, for although evangelicalism may have been useful for scholars in pursuit of new perspectives, it has proven remarkably barren in sustaining the faith of believers who need spiritual sustenance more than trendy analysis” (28). Hart cites Lewis Smedes (“evangelicalism is a fantasy”) and Nathan Hatch (“in truth, there is no such thing as evangelicalism”) to buttress his own contention that maintaining a discussion about evangelical ecclesiology, for example, is really a waste of time, a spinning of wheels. In this view, evangelical ecclesiology is an oxymoron, not because of the dearth of ecclesiological reflection found among evangelicals but because the category evangelical as popularly used by analysis such as those reviewed here is a nonentity, a mere intellectual construction.

The sometimes-harsh tone of Hart’s judgment may turn away precisely those who need to harken to it. Hart’s point is that because of the indifference of evangelicals to formal ecclesiological questions, because of their antipathy toward the formal church, “evangelicals have substituted their own religious forms for the ones that historically governed Christianity. . . . In effect, the evangelical movement of the late twentieth-century replaced the church with the parachurch, and it developed forms to match” (30). Furthermore, this parachurch Christianity has not fared well, according to Hart. The reason is that “to defend and propagate the essential truths of the Bible, neo-evangelical leaders pared back denominational (read churchly) accretions such as a full-blown creed, an order of worship, and a polity to govern ordination and exercise discipline.” The movement, however, “ended up splintering because it lacked the discipline and rigor of the church” (30). Whether one agrees with all the details that follow in Hart’s concrete analysis of evangelicalism key institutions and leaders or not, his observations and contentions deserve serious attention. At stake is the identity of the church itself. Hart calls us to consider the often-obvious rootlessness of contemporary evangelicalism and what he calls “evangelical schizophrenia”—the wavering between the remarkable evangelical passion for conversionist piety and the simultaneous powerful attraction of contemporary cultural values in a desire for acceptance and relevance. So, we have teenage girls looking and acting like Britney Spears leading contemporary
praise and worship gatherings in evangelical churches that publicly profess so-called traditional values. The truly oxymoronic ecclesiological question may be: Can evangelicalism survive its own popularity and success?

In the very starkness of that question lies the hope for the church. For churches to live, they must first die. That is the fundamental cruciform principle of the gospel itself. Here, Michael Jinkins’ essay and Thomas Oden’s book provide the most important message for the evangelical community in North America.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the body of Christ; the fundamental responsibility of the church is to be church. Let me reframe that in the categories that Hunsberger suggested as the basis for a missional ecclesiology, the category of narrative. The basic narrative of Scripture is the fourfold pattern of creation-fall-redemption-consummation, and the church exists in the narrative chronology of the triune God’s covenantal involvement with his people between the accomplished redemption of Christ in his cross, resurrection, and ascension on the one side and the full hope of the consummated kingdom on the other.

In baptism a person is joined to the body of Christ, and, in the Lord’s Supper, the core dramatic turn of the narrative is reenacted as a remembrance and as a confession of hope. “We do this in remembrance until he comes again.” In this way, the church is constituted and reconstituted. The pattern of remembering and reenacting the mighty acts of God as the means of constituting the people of God and equipping them for service is as old as the covenant people themselves. Old Testament scholar Peter Craigie, in speaking about the Psalms, put it this way:

And it was the essence of the Hebrew faith that the past could always be appropriated for the present, that the people in faith could look in the present moment for the continuation of those mighty acts of God in the past which had been so pregnant with future implications.2

For evangelical churches to thrive in today’s world, rather than looking for ways to accommodate to postmodern narrative identities, they will need to strengthen their identity and rootedness in the narrative of Scripture and the tradition of the church’s two millennia history of interpreting and living out of Scripture. That is the only way of escaping the oxymoronic morass in which evangelical ecclesiology now finds itself.

---

2 Peter C. Craigie, Psalms 1-50 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 333; I am indebted to my colleague Carl Bosma for this reference.