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**THEOLOGICAL
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The Vocation of the Theologian

by Robert K. Johnston

The fiction of John Updike has its detractors and its disciples. Some consider him to be a master of saying nothing well—a writer capable of dazzling displays of talent and even erudition, but one holding a shallow vision of life. Others consider his work the labor of a serious artist trying to make comprehensible life's mystery. Critics and followers alike, however, consider Updike one of our most sensitive commentators (or better, portrayers) of the American scene. Over the last quarter of a century, Updike has chronicled America's changes in psyche and society, in small town and in suburbia.

Updike has returned to religion time and again. Unable to accept the faith characteristic of his small-town roots, he has nonetheless sought a blessing from above for many of his characters. Whether a frightened boy in a barn shooting pigeons, an adulterous ex-basketball star whose child has drowned, a wayward cleric or an urban artist seeking to uncover the mystery of his childhood sense of place, Updike's archetypal character wrestles with his standing before the divine. As he does, Updike's hero (there are few heroines) mirrors a wider dis-ease apparent in our society.

Given such a pattern, it is significant that in Updike's latest novel, *Roger's Version*, he turns to the question of the vocation of the theologian. His central character, Roger Lambert, 52, is an assistant professor of theology in one of the Boston seminaries (the description fits Harvard although the location is only implied) and an ordained Methodist cleric. He is now teaching, for a love affair with one of his parishoners 14 years earlier has not only ended his first marriage but his first career as well. While wayward clerics have previously supplied Updike his literary grist, Roger is distinct in that he suffers not so much from a sense of guilt but from a pervasive numbness of spirit. He hides this behind an erudition in his public life and a fascination with sexuality in his private life.

Such barrenness of soul and fecundity of body continue themes evident in Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* and is surely a caricature of those of us in the theological guild. But Updike has as usual felt the pulse of the wider American experience. Although the theological crises Americans face is hardly the challenge Roger encounters (of responding to a graduate student who believes the existence of God can be proven by processing the known data about the universe on a computer), the theological enterprise is nonetheless in crises.

Vanderbilt's Edward Farley spoke to something of this issue in his seminal book, *Theologia* (1983), although his purview was the whole of theological education. A better indicator of the crises perhaps is Theodore Jennings' edited volume, *The Vocation of the Theologian* (1985). Growing out of a consultation at Emory University on the redesign of its graduate program in systematic theology, the volume has a list of contributors that reads like a who's who of America's ecumenical theologians—Wainwright, Ruether, Kaufman, Gilkey, Cobb, Cone, and Altizer (Miguez-Bonino represents a Latin American liberationist perspective too). Yet, although the essays in their particularity are meant to further constructive theological work, what is evident to Jennings as editor is "the shifting kaleidoscope of intersections and divergences" within the theological community.¹

Jennings attempts to give this situation a positive face in his epilogue. He believes "the absence of a consensus concerning (theology's) aim and object, its sources, its center, its boundaries" and the opening of theological work to a "vigorously contested (and celebrated) pluralism" are "the indispensable context for the exercise of theology as a liberal discipline." Yet even Jennings is more candid than this concerning the situation in theology today in his introduction to the volume, which he labels "The Crisis of Theology." He notes that in American theology today, there is "the deflection of theological energy, the avoidance of theological tasks, indeed, even the abdication of theological responsibility."²

Theology has been reduced to (1) prolegomenon—the study of questions of hermeneutics, (2) historical theology—the study of other theologians or theological traditions, and (3) interdisciplinary study—the study of theology and literature, psychology, or social sciences in which theology is largely assumed and the creative energy given to bridge-building between the disciplines. For Jennings, the crisis is not to be measured in terms of these activities themselves, all creative and even necessary. Rather, the crisis is observed "in the way in which these activities have usurped the place of actual constructive and/or systematic theological work." "It is the absence, lack, and silence at the center of our work which transforms our scholarly productivity into feverish business (business?)."³ Ecumenical theology seems now to be in eclipse. It no longer shapes culture, life or thought to any significant degree.

Evangelical Trends

A word concerning evangelical theology is similarly discouraging. Evangelicals have come a different route with hardly more pleasing consequence. Historians like Sydney Ahlstrom and George Marsden chronicle evangelicalism's twentieth century unwillingness to entertain a critical spirit. There has been a pervasive anti-intellectualism, a social and political conservatism, a marked otherworldliness, and a separatism both ecclesiastical and cultural that have combined to make evangelicals an "embattled minority."⁴ At least such is evangelicalism's fundamentalist legacy.

The first frontal challenge to such a fundamentalism was sounded from within the movement by Carl Henry in his *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.⁵ Since that time evangelicals have entered increasingly into both the academic and social arenas. Their growing involvement has, to be sure, caused a counterreaction by modern-day fundamentalists. The Moral Majority and the new surge in Christian schools and home education are an attempt to stem the tide. Yet for large numbers of evangelicals the break has been made. Any continuing narrowness in traditional evangelical theology is, even to many evangelicals, "obstrusive and a little depressing," to quote James Packer, himself a leading evangelical theologian.⁶ There is a recognized need to move beyond a fortress mentality (with its emphasis on apologetics) and speak out clearly and constructively a positive theological agenda. Perhaps Fuller Seminary can be viewed as a symbol of this shift as George Marsden's new book, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* delineates.⁷

In the October 17, 1986 issue of *Christianity Today*, this leading evangelical voice took stock of its last thirty years in

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publishing. Gordon-Conwell theologian David Wells was asked to write on evangelical theology and he labeled his remarks, "A Strange Turbulence." Again, one notes the sense of crisis in vocation that is being suggested. Wells speaks of American evangelicalism beginning as a small movement with dominant theological figures and now being a large movement with few established thinkers. It is not only the ecumenicals with their loss of Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich and the Niebuhrs who have suffered theological loss. Evangelicals have not spawned a new generation of thinkers either. The result, according to Wells, has been an abandonment of serious theological reflection by many laity, a borrowing from such imports as Berkouwer and Thielicke by many clergy, and a return to historical theology by others.

that an over-dogmatism in religion produces. Schulz is correct; dogmatism stifles theological creativity.

The history of evangelical theology's dogmatism is so univocal that Paul Holmer can characterize "systematic theology of the evangelical sort" as "a kind of tenseless, moodless tissue of erstwhile truths, ineluctable, shiny, and necessary . . . teachable, tangible, and orthodox."¹¹ Holmer has in mind articles such as John Gerstner's "The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith" (in Wells and Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals*), that seek to narrow evangelical theology's boundaries to a tightly reformed perspective (even Finney is called a foe of evangelicalism).¹²

Kenneth Kantzer, too, does not want "to sacrifice the term, Evangelical, for something less than full Protestant ortho-

Hermeneutical theology with its emphasis on revision and creativity dominates ecumenical circles. Catechetical theology with its essentially conservative agenda characterizes evangelical thought. Neither model, however, has proven fully adequate to the contemporary vocation of the theologian.

There has been in evangelicalism, too, a period of theological fragmentation. Carl Henry's six volumes, *God, Revelation and Authority*, demand of their readers a philosophical positioning that has failed to garner evangelical consensus. Other theological volumes are restatements of existing theologies, not fresh formulations. None has captured the broad allegiance of evangelicals. As Wells suggests, "The time is undoubtedly ripe for theologians to capitalize on the rich harvest of biblical studies of recent decades, the maturing awareness of evangelical responsibility in culture and society, and the absence of serious competitors in the wider theological world." Yet Wells admits that such a prospect is not necessarily forthcoming.⁸

Here, then, is the situation facing Christian theology today. Hermeneutical theology with its emphasis on revision and creativity dominates ecumenical circles. Catechetical theology with its essentially conservative agenda characterizes evangelical thought. Neither model, however, has proven fully adequate to the contemporary vocation of the theologian. Packer can praise evangelical thinkers today for "their concentration on the person and work of Jesus Christ."⁹ Jennings can celebrate the theologian's "vocation of freedom."¹⁰ But each is all too aware of his tradition's shortcomings. The crises is on both the theological left and the theological right, and it is at present severe enough to have called into question the very vocation of the theologian.

If evangelicals and ecumenicals are to move beyond their present feverish busyness to substantial theological output, they must learn to listen to each other and appropriate one another's strengths methodologically. In particular, evangelicals need to learn from theological revisionists something of theology's *art*. Ecumenicals, on the other hand, need to discover from theological conservatives something of theology's necessary *heart*.

The "Art" of Theology

In one of his Peanuts comic strips, Charles Schulz has Lucy say to Snoopy, "You'll never be a good theologian . . . you're too DOGmatic! HaHaHaHaHa!" After bonking Lucy on the head with his typewriter, Snoopy lies down and reflects in disgust, "I hate jokes like that!" The joke hinges, of course, on the word-play concerning "dogmatic." But it also is dependent upon a general perception of the rigidity and sterility

doxy," even though his definition and Gerstner's would differ. Kantzer has been a leader in reconciling warring factions within evangelicalism. With evangelicals from Luther's day onward, Kantzer argues for evangelicalism's formal principle of the authority of scripture and its material principle, the gospel. However, when Kantzer discusses what this material principle implies, he narrows in, listing sixteen necessary doctrines: a pre-existent Christ, Jesus Christ as divine-human, the virgin birth, Christ's substitutionary atonement, Christ's bodily resurrection, and so on.¹³ One can hardly argue that his list deviates from historic Protestantism (at least, I would not). Nonetheless, the theological task seems finished as we listen to his explication. It is buttoned up tightly. Questions concerning the juxtaposition of biblical images of the atonement, for example, seem out of place. All that seems required is faithful reiteration. Theological creativity seems unnecessary, if not suspect.

To give a third example, Carl Henry edited an early and seminal work entitled *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought*.¹⁴ It includes three articles on special revelation. Not only is there a discussion of "Special Revelation as Historical and Personal," but articles by Gordon Clark on "Special Revelation as Rational" and by William J. Martin on "Special Revelation as Objective" set the tone for the volume. It is this bias toward philosophical rationalism that has turned much of evangelical theology into little more than elaborate engineering projects—apologetic efforts demanding special form and structure that "tidy up" biblical revelation through "analytic and undefinitional exactness."¹⁵

In an interesting article entitled "Evangelicals and Theological Creativity," long time Fuller Seminary Professor Geoffrey Bromiley comments, "In this significant field of originality or creativity, Evangelical theology seems to many people to be at an inherent disadvantage." And as this article proceeds, though contrary to Bromiley's intention, such an initial judgment seems, indeed, to be in order. Bromiley would allow for "sober creative activity." "Theology must keep a *scientific* procedure in studying and describing the data," he argues. Theology is, thus, an *objective* enterprise" (italics mine). For Bromiley, "false creativity arises when theology is treated as one of the arts instead of the sciences." Such a conservative posture need not close off positive and constructive theological work, he feels. Room for creativity remains in research, interpretation and application. He pleads for evangelicals to move be-

yond a defensive mentality, "a fixation on Liberal extravaganzas of speculation," and to present strong and attractive theological alternatives. Somehow, however, new evangelical efforts at theological creativity seem more likely to be semantic redefinition in the schematic than to evidence real originality.¹⁶

What these evangelicals and the majority of their colleagues continue to react against is the viewpoint of those like Gordon Kaufman and I.M. Crombie who understand theology to be "a sort of art of enlightened ignorance."¹⁷ They applaud those like Geoffrey Wainwright who expressed the hope in his inaugural address at Union Seminary in 1980 that his listeners would find "nothing substantially new" in this lecture. "In theology," stated Wainwright, "novelty is too often too close to heresy."¹⁸

our politics and our play, our work and our religion. We often find ourselves propelled beyond ourselves. Moreover, in searching for meaning, we sometimes discover a meaning which transforms that search, so we find what we are seeking without knowing that we seek it. Our search is where we must begin epistemologically, experientially. But having found, in the case of Christian theology, the surprising presence of a divine other—a co-presence, we come to realize that even our search was motivated and directed by the other. The songwriter has expressed it well: "I sought the Lord and afterwards I knew . . . I was found by Thee."

The art of theological co-relation has its dangers. The prevalence of grace can become merely an apologetic device, a means of leveling disturbing insights and preempting pro-

Theology is not only a science, but an art, and novelty and creativity have characterized the thought of past theological giants.

Yet, theology is not only a science, but an art, and novelty and creativity have characterized the thought of past theological giants. Even Wainwright in his seminal work *Doxology* evidences real originality particularity in his interweaving of Protestant and Orthodox perspectives. Evangelical reticence in recognizing theology's art can only impede its theological progress. As Bernard Lonergan observed in his book, *Method in Theology*, theological "method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity."¹⁹

The edited volume *Christian Theology: An Introduction to its Traditions and Tasks* is one such example of "collaborative creativity." Accepting the premises of the Enlightenment as a given and finding in Schleiermacher's cultural reformulation of Christian doctrine a methodological analogue, the dozen or more leading ecumenical theologians who contributed to the volume agreed that the "tradition must be transformed if it is to be responsive to the challenge of the modern age." Beginning each chapter of their constructive theology with a description of "where we are," the authors assumed disjunction with the received tradition given the Enlightenment and sketched out a program for future system building.²⁰

The reformist programmatic spelled out in *Christian Theology* is provocative. It sets a high standard for all in its scholarship and creative vision. However, evangelicals will find its approach unnecessarily one-sided, centering too completely in the Enlightenment emphasis on "the interpretive capacities of the self in the construction of the world."²¹ Any substantial help from Scripture or tradition is downplayed in these pages. For these authors, scripture's and tradition's "house of authority has collapsed, despite the fact that many people still try to live in it."²²

What is presented methodologically, one could argue, is a transformation of Paul Tillich's theology of correlation, the issues of Enlightenment thought finding their complement in the fundamental symbolic content of the Christian faith. But just as question dictated response in Tillich's theology, Tillich's protestation notwithstanding, so modern attempts at the art of the theological correlation seem too often to reduce revelation's creative impact.

For this reason, I would suggest that the necessary *art* of the theological formulation be understood not as a task of correlation, but as a dialogue based in co-relation (I am indebted to Thomas Langford for this insight). There is a transcendent thrust in humankind, a quest, or search, which is evident in

ductive dialogue. A commitment to Scripture's divine revelation cannot be allowed to fix our experience with Scripture or our conviction as to what Scripture is saying. But a theology of co-relation can also open one up to creative two-way dialogue. As Bernard Lonergan points out, "Theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and the role of a religion in that matrix."²³ Here is the art of theology rightly understood. We begin our life in the world, but we are not limited theologically to that perspective. Our pre-understanding not only provides illumination; it is also in need of transformation. As Peter Berger cautioned in his *A Rumor of Angels*, "We must begin in the situation in which we find ourselves, but we must not submit to it as to an irresistible tyranny."²⁴

Perhaps mindful of Schleiermacher's metaphor, evangelical theologian William Dyrness has suggested Scripture will function for the theologian "more like a musical score than a blueprint." "A score gives guidance but it must always be played afresh."²⁵ We come to the score as modern men and women and the theological music we produce will sound accordingly contemporary. Nevertheless, we are as musicians not left to our own devices. God in his grace has provided us music to play. Such is the artistic task the theologian must accept.

The "Heart" of Theology

If evangelical theologians need to learn from their ecumenical colleagues that theology is more a dialogical "art" than an analytical "science," ecumenical theologians can learn from their evangelical counterparts that a correlation exists between theological integrity and sanctification. We are surely on sensitive ground here. Too often critics of a particular theologian's formulation have gloated when biographers have exposed personal inconsistencies. Non-Tillichians have noted, for example, Tillich's pornography collection and have been tempted to say, "I told you so." Such cheap theological biography has no place in the Christian community. A theologian's work can outdistance his personal appropriation of it.

On the other hand, the continuing influence in evangelical circles of C.S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer is largely due to the strong correlation between their writings and their witness. These men lived out what they wrote with high integrity, and thus their theologies have a compelling quality.

We can, perhaps, be again instructed by Charles Schulz's Peanuts as we consider theology's necessary inner heart. Lucy is once again speaking to Snoopy who has returned to his typewriter on his doghouse roof. She asks rhetorically the

would-be canine theologian, "How can you write about theology? You've never been in a church?" This causes Snoopy to reflect, "Au contraire! When I was at the Daisy Hill Puppy Farm, we went to chapel every morning! I was part of a forty-beagle choir." As Snoopy lies down, putting his head on his typewriter, he rhapsodizes, "You've never hear 'Rock of Ages' until you've heard it sung by forty beagles!" Lucy, again, speaks more than she knows. Schulz's humor hinges on our uneasy awareness that theology today is too often being written irrespective of the living faith of the Christian community.

In his article "The Theologian as Christian Scholar," the present dean of the Duke Divinity School, Dennis Campbell, comments on the professional drift of contemporary theology. He compares the present situation in academic theology to Albert William Levi's discussion of the modern professionalization of philosophy:

Philosophy today is primarily a matter of professional competence, and we no longer ask if the motive of its possessor is a deep spiritual commitment to the passionate search for some fleeting insight into the wisdom of life The divorce between technical concern and spiritual relevance seems to have become absolute.²⁶

There has been, argues Campbell, a similar tendency in ecumenical theology for it to become "principally a matter of professional competence." Chief among the many reasons for this reorientation, Campbell believes, is the changed social location of the Protestant theologian from the Christian community to the secular academy. As William Hamilton narrated in his sensitive essay entitled "Thursday's Child," some theologians for whom a traditional faith commitment is not a personal reality feel trapped in doing a job they have no interest in.²⁷

For Campbell, the answer to this crises in theology is not a naive return to pseudo-certainties, but a renewed consideration of the role of "the theologian as *Christian scholar*" (italics mine). He argues, "I am not proposing that the theologian cannot work effectively in the secular academy; but wherever the theologian might work, without the church as a primary community of identity and loyalty, constructive theology cannot be sustained."²⁸

Such a viewpoint is the *sine qua non* of evangelical theology. To be an evangelical is not only to do theology from out of a biblical center, but to join with others who emphasize the importance of a "personal relationship" with Jesus Christ who is Savior and Lord of one's life. Loyalty to Christ impels the evangelical "to demonstrate God's love and to carry out God's mission in worship, nurture, evangelism, and justice."²⁹

This evangelical agenda of sanctification has its historical roots most particularly in pietism. Although this often maligned movement degenerated into anti-intellectual sentimental excess, its flowering was profound and energizing. It is far more telling than is generally perceived that the label "pietist" has become a pejorative one in the theological guild today. Spener in his *Pia Desideria*, and Arndt, in his book *True Christianity*, protested vigorously against a theology gone academic. "What had happened [by the time of Pietism's flowering] was that the *religious* and the personal, experiential dimensions of justification by grace through faith were missing."³⁰ The Pietists thus argued for the balancing perspective of sanctification.

Pietists sought not to overturn the evangelical Reformation, but to complete and perfect it. They, like their evangelical colleagues in the awakening movements of later generations, sought a reform of the church through small renewal groups and through an extended mission of proclamation and social demonstration. As Richard Lovelace points out, "The majority

of the Pietists . . . were united in insisting that ministers and church members should reform not only their doctrines but their lives."³¹ Their leaders during the seventeenth century worked to create theologies of "live orthodoxy" that challenged both individuals and congregations to move beyond mere mental commitment to conversion and spiritual renewal. The pietist literature is only now being adequately translated and republished, but it is both intellectually profound and spiritually alive.

It would be wrong to isolate theological engagement to within the evangelical community. Among contemporary ecumenicals influenced by liberation and/or post-Barthian models of Christian thought, engagement has a similarly high agenda. But among ecumenical theologians adopting an Enlightenment ethos, churchly and confessional theology is too often criticized. To conceive of theology essentially in terms of the church amounts to "a kind of ecclesiastical positivism," to quote Gordon Kaufman, for example. Kaufman desires theology to interpret and explain the church, not vice-versa. He states:

. . . it is evident that the church does not provide theology with its real foundations (today), nor can the church define for us what theology is or should be as a vocation.³²

Kaufman is relentless in pushing his point. Although thinking of himself primarily as a Christian theologian, Kaufman is not willing to have Christ displace God in the order of our thinking and valuing. "Theology is," for Kaufman, "first and foremost 'thinking about God,' not 'thinking about Christ.'"³³ Such a public vocation seeks a theology which is intelligible, not authoritative. As such, theology continues to find *God the Problem* (the title of Kaufman's 1971 volume).³⁴

Schubert Ogden, in his article, "On Teaching Theology," argues similarly that theology must remain theoretical: "I do not understand my function to be in any way to teach the Christian witness by directly instructing and training my students to bear it."³⁵ There seems little danger here that students might find the technical, second-order reflection of theology something so worth believing that men and women might live radically new lives on its account.

Conclusion

The vocational crisis facing the American theologian is this: evangelical engagement has yet to produce vibrant theology for it has too often refused to take seriously the "art" of its craft. Ecumenical reflection, on the other hand, has produced more rigorous, thoughtful and creative theology, but theology which is too often sterile, lacking "heart."

There are, however, signs of hope, particularly among evangelicals and ecumenicals alike who have been influenced by Barthian and/or liberation models of theological engagement.

Frederick Herzog, for example, has joined the phrases "God-walk" and "God-talk" in his theological formulation. In writings such as his book *Liberation Theology*, he argues for the overthrow of our present understanding of the human, one at the same time Puritan and Cartesian. We need, instead, to meet Jesus. It is he who will turn us from private, modern individuals to a realization of our corporate identity.

In an article entitled "Embarassed by God's Presence" which appeared in the *Christian Century* in January of 1985, William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas noted

. . . an increasingly strong stress on Christian formation and sanctification. Wesley was right; the gospel is not simply about forgiveness; it is also about response. The

gospel is more than a set of interesting ideas; it is a whole way of life which requires the church to be holy. It is always *contretemps*, always an alternative to life in the world. We are therefore at odds with those who turn theology into an arcane discipline, the urbane pastime of graduate schools of religion. Theological integrity and sanctification are inextricably related. Christian theology is renewed not by new thinking, but by new living.³⁶

Correspondingly, we might take note of evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm's recent book, *After Fundamentalism* (1983). Ramm sees the need to get beyond liberalism and fundamentalism. Taking his cue from Karl Barth, Ramm finds himself increasingly uncomfortable with evangelicalism's obscurantism which has issued from its disregard of the Enlightenment. He writes:

My concern is that evangelicals have not come to a systematic method of interacting with modern knowledge. They have not developed a theological method that enables them to be consistently evangelical in their theology and to be people of modern learning. That is why a new (theological) paradigm is necessary.³⁷

Theological mavericks on the left and on the right (liberationists, post-Barthians, and progressive evangelicals) are beginning a theological *rapprochement* that is encouraging. The dialogue must continue with a wider range of significant voices joining in. Both paradigm and piety demand our best present theological efforts.

¹ Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Epilogue: The Vitality of Theology," in Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 144.
² *Ibid.*, pp. 145; Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Introduction: The Crises of Theology," in Theodore Jennings, ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian*, p. 2.
³ Theodore Jennings, "The Crises of Theology," p. 4.
⁴ The phrase is Sydney Ahlstrom's, "From Puritanism to Evangelicalism: A Critical Perspective," in David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 285.
⁵ Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

⁶ James I. Packer, "Taking Stock in Theology," in John King, ed., *Evangelicals Today* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1973), p. 29.
⁷ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
⁸ David F. Wells, "A Strange Turbulence," *Christianity Today*, 30, No. 15 (October 17, 1986), p. 20.
⁹ James Packer, "Taking Stock in Theology," p. 29.
¹⁰ Theodore Jennings, "The Vitality of Theology," p. 145.
¹¹ Paul Holmer, "Contemporary Evangelical Faith: An Assessment and Critique," in David Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals*, p. 78.
¹² John H. Gerstner, "The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith," in David Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals*.
¹³ Kenneth Kantzer, "The Future of the Church and Evangelicalism," in Donald Hoke, ed., *Evangelicals Face the Future* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), pp. 132-133.
¹⁴ Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958).
¹⁵ Paul Holmer, "Contemporary Evangelical Faith," pp. 82, 90.
¹⁶ Geoffrey Bromiley, "Evangelicals and Theological Creativity," *Themelios* (Sept., 1979), pp. 4-8.
¹⁷ I.M. Crombie, quoted in Gordon D. Kaufman, "Theology as a Public Vocation," in Theodore Jennings, *The Vocation of the Theologian*, p. 49.
¹⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright, "Toward God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 36 (supplementary issue, 1981): 13.
¹⁹ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. xi.
²⁰ Robert H. King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology," in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 14.
²¹ John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Religions," in Peter Hodgson and Robert King, eds., *Christian Theology*, p. 355.
²² David Tracy, "Theological Method," in Peter Hodgson and Robert King, eds., *Christian Theology*, p. 50.
²³ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. xi.
²⁴ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 94, quoted in William A. Dyrness, "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life?" in Robert K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 161.
²⁵ William Dyrness, "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life?," p. 171.
²⁶ Albert William Levi, *Philosophy as Social Expression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 110, quoted in Dennis Campbell, "The Theologian as Christian Scholar," *Religion in Life*, 45 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 319-320.
²⁷ Dennis Campbell, "The Theologian as Christian Scholar," p. 320.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 320-322.
²⁹ David Allan Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 15.
³⁰ C. John Weborg, "Reborn in Order to Renew," *Christian History*, 5, No. 2 (1986): 17.
³¹ Richard Lovelace, "A Call to Historic Roots and Continuity," in Robert E. Webber and Donald Bloesch, eds., *The Orthodox Evangelicals* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 56.
³² Gordon Kaufman, "Theology as a Public Vocation," in Theodore Jennings, *The Vocation of the Theologian*, pp. 50-51.
³³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
³⁴ Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
³⁵ Schubert Ogden, "On Teaching Theology," *Criterion*, 25, No. 1 (Winter, 1986): 12-14.
³⁶ William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, "Embarassed by God's Presence," *Christian Century*, 102 (January 30, 1985), p. 99.
³⁷ Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 27.

From Truth to Authority to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Evangelical Hermeneutics, 1915-1986

by Douglas Jacobsen

American Christianity is dynamic, not static. It exists in a shifting historical situation, not a vacuum. The visible church cannot fully escape this fact of historical change as the climate of the day. From day to day, reactions to it may appear quite imperceptible; in the span of a generation they will become quite apparent, and may even be cataclysmic. (Christianity Today, editorial I:3, November 12, 1956).

This article is about biblical hermeneutics. What I mean by this term is simultaneously broad and yet simple. Hermeneutics refers to the process of thinking by which one renders the meaning of the Bible available to people living in a later age. My interest here is not in the fine points of exegesis or with particular interpretations of particular passages of the Bible. Nor is my interest focused on the particular rules of interpretation that may or may not be part of the hermeneutical tools

of a given era. Rather, I want to zero in on the underlying core of a hermeneutical stance—or, to be more accurate, I want to isolate the three different hermeneutical root metaphors that have shaped three different generations of American Evangelical hermeneutics.¹

Let me expand this idea of root hermeneutical metaphors. Very obviously the biblical hermeneutical process is complex. It is no easy task to understand and to make present to a contemporary audience the meaning of a 2000 year old book. This task is made even more difficult when one is committed to the belief that the meaning of the biblical text needs to be presented both in an academically accurate manner and in a way that will grab the hearts of its hearers. As complex as this picture may be, it is also the case that almost all hermeneutical positions are grounded in some one primary concept, value, or metaphor around which all this complexity swirls in an orderly fashion. This core idea—this root metaphor from which all else grows—identifies the basic point of contact

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