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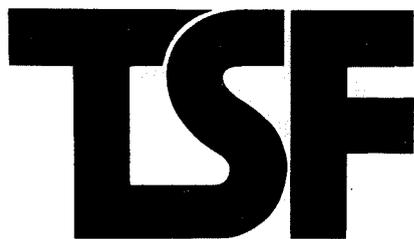
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Barth as Post-Enlightenment Guide: Three Responses to Ramm

by George Hunsinger, John B. Cobb, Jr., and Carl F. H. Henry

After Fundamentalism

by Bernard Ramm (Harper & Row, 1983, 240 pp., \$14.95).

Although the title is misleading, this book deserves the attention of theologians, students, pastors, and theologically astute laypeople. Ramm *does* point the way out of fundamentalism, but he also argues that liberal theology took a wrong turn. In the preface, Ramm sets out his agenda:

The leading themes are as follows: (1) The Enlightenment was a shattering experience for orthodox theology from which it has never fully recovered. (2) Neither religious liberalism nor orthodoxy had the right strategy for interacting with the Enlightenment with reference to the continuing task of Christian theology. (3) Of all the efforts of theologians to come to terms with the Enlightenment, Karl Barth's theology has been the most thorough. (4) He thereby offers to evangelical theology a paradigm of how best to come to terms with the Enlightenment.

My basic methodology is to first review the impact of the Enlightenment on a given doctrine. Then I review how Barth handles the doctrine in view of the criticism of the Enlightenment. Finally, I show how Barth's stances may be a paradigm for evangelical theology (even if only in a heuristic sense). By *paradigm* I mean a model, a pattern or schema, for writing theology. By *heuristic* I mean a hypothesis which may not prove to be true but which is instrumental in leading to the discovery of the true one.

An excerpt comprising the core of Ramm's challenge was published earlier in *TSF Bulletin* as "Evangelicals and the Enlightenment: Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism" (January-February 1983). Now three reviewers provide their perspectives. George Hunsinger, Instructor in Theology at New Brunswick Theological Seminary, is the editor and translator of *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Westminster). He has participated in the Evangelical Theology Group at the American Academy of Religion and is an advisor to the TSF group at New Brunswick. John B. Cobb, Jr., Professor of Theology at Claremont School of Theology, has written numerous volumes including *Liberal Christianity at the Crossroads* (Westminster) and *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Westminster). His Wesleyan, liberal theology is a creative force within Process Theology. Carl F. H. Henry, formerly the editor of *Christianity Today*, has completed five volumes of a major systematic theology, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Word). He continues to be regarded as the leading theologian of America's conservative evangelicals. These three reviewers approach Bernard Ramm's book from different viewpoints. They all value Ramm's contribution, and, of course, find various elements requiring critique.

In some respects *After Fundamentalism* can be seen as an overpriced accumulation of extended thoughts. These often lack careful organization and transitions, and usually suggest trajectories that cry out for further expansion. Nevertheless, Ramm and Harper & Row are to be commended for their timing. The North American church needs theological guidance. Fundamentalists and liberals usually talk past each other. Too often mistaken assumptions rule instead of caring and diligent efforts at understanding. We need to recognize the particular cultural context in which these difficult discussions are taking place, a context which can be identified as post-Enlightenment. Although there are other important contextual issues for North American

theology (e.g., the increasingly multi-cultural nature of the American church, the continuing debate concerning the dualistic nature of Western theology and the impact of world economics), Ramm has highlighted a critical issue. He clarifies our post-Enlightenment situation, identifies particular problems, and provides initial formulas for new directions.

The three critiques included here should help carry the dialogue further. Students and professors would be wise to continue the process.

—Mark Lau Branson

Review by George Hunsinger

One of the main reasons Bernard Ramm wrote *After Fundamentalism* is that he wants people to read widely and deeply in the theology of Karl Barth. "My thesis," he says, "is that Barth's theology is the best paradigm we have for theology in our times." With this judgment and this intention I can heartily concur. It is almost always better, as Ramm also points out, to read Barth himself than merely to read about Barth. Barth has yet to acquire, it seems to me, a truly worthy critic—a critic who knows how to combine sympathetic insight and discerning objections in proper proportion; in other words, one whose stature as a critic begins to match Barth's stature as a constructive theologian. Instead, Barth-criticism to date tends to fall into three categories: fawning approbation (Barthians), tendentious fault-finding (neo-orthodox and evangelicals), or dismissive praise (liberals). It is hard to read this sort of criticism without feeling that Barth is a man being pecked to death by ducks.

Ramm's silence has the unfortunate effect of presenting us with yet another picture of a politically defanged Barth.

So let me simply second Bernard Ramm's intention and urge you to read Karl Barth. Read the magnificent section on God as "the One who Loves in Freedom" in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (pp. 257ff.), or read the deeply moving account of the relationship between God's mercy and God's righteousness in the same volume (pp. 369ff., especially pp. 394-406). Compare what you find there with any of the negative things you may ever have heard about Barth and judge for yourself. Or turn to Barth's incredibly rich exegesis of the story of the rich young ruler (II/2, pp. 613ff.); after that see if you do not find yourself thumbing through the index volume to discover if Barth might have anything to say about the scriptural text on which you are preparing a sermon. Or if you happen to be strongly interested in social ethics, take a look at Barth's scathing critique of capitalism (III/4, pp. 531ff.) or at his sobering reflections on abortion (III/4, pp. 415ff.).

One need not always agree with Barth to appreciate the depth and

integrity of his work. But if your experience is anything like mine, you will find that before long, and despite any initial obstacles in reading him, he has you hooked. After a while almost everything else in contemporary theology begins to seem pale by comparison. After reading Barth for some time you may find yourself driven back to read the great historic theologians of the church, for somehow most of the contemporary theological offerings of whatever stripe will no longer impress you as satisfying. But I can only report to you my own experience: more often than not I find that when I am perplexed Barth brings real clarity, that when I study Scripture he offers great light, and that when I am depressed he does not fail to cheer me up.

Radical politics, universalist leanings and an acceptance of modern biblical criticism are the three main issues which usually separate Barth from American evangelicals. On the first of these Bernard Ramm in *After Fundamentalism* has virtually nothing to say. He seems to be untouched by the hopeful and recent political ferment in the evangelical community as evidenced by an initiative like the 1973 Chicago Declaration or the heartening influence of a magazine like *Sojourners*. Ramm repeats the old half-truth that "it was a crisis in his preaching as a pastor that started Barth in a new direction in his theology," and he neglects its political context: "I decided for theology," explained Barth, "because I felt a need to find a better basis for my social action." Ramm's silence has the unfortunate effect of presenting us with yet another picture of a politically defanged Barth.

The question of "universalism" receives one chapter in Ramm's book as well as some scattered comments elsewhere. Here again Ramm seems to be at a distance from the cutting edge of recent evangelical thought, although by no means so drastically as in the previous instance. Ramm is, for example, not prepared to go as far as Herman Ridderbos—who is himself certainly no flaming liberal among the exegetes. In his widely-acclaimed book, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, Ridderbos argues that Paul leaves us in effect with a sort of reverent agnosticism concerning universal salvation. Ridderbos speaks of "the impossibility of coming . . . to an at all rounded off and systematic conception . . . This applies in particular to the punitive judgment on unbelievers and the ungodly." As Ramm indicates in his usual fair and accurate but cursory way, Barth's position is similar to the one taken by Ridderbos with the difference that Barth sets forth a strong christological basis for universal hope. With all due regard for the scriptural ambiguities, Barth thinks there is real reason to believe that in the end we may all be surprised by grace. Since Ramm is capable of explaining Barth's view with sympathy, I was surprised and disappointed to find him later suggesting that "Christianity isn't important unless 'somebody around here can get damned'"—an utterance I think any Christian ought to find repugnant.

Ramm is obviously more interested in Barth's view of Scripture and its relation to modern criticism than in any other single topic. The fact that nearly one-third of the book is devoted to this aspect of Barth's thought bespeaks not only Ramm's theological background, but also his zeal as one who has apparently received from Barth something liberating at this point. As though a refugee from too much thankless infighting, Ramm writes that Barth "does not commit us to the worn-out arguments of the past that nevertheless keep cropping up in so much evangelical literature. And he does not think that commonly recognized difficulties in a text prevent the text from being an authentic witness to the Word of God." Ramm is enthusiastically convinced that Barth can help evangelicals avoid both the obscurantism of the faithful and the capitulation of the liberals. One can only hope that he is right. In spite of its shortcomings, Bernard Ramm's book is a step in that direction.

Review by John B. Cobb, Jr.

Between what is taught in most seminaries of the denominations that participate in the National Council of Churches, on the one side, and fundamentalist pre-millennial dispensationalism, on the other, there is an almost unbridgeable gulf. For some of us dialogue is easier with Hindus and Buddhists than with many fundamentalists. Unfortunately there is some tendency in these seminaries to treat all forms of fundamentalism, and even all forms of Protestant conservatism, as though they were committed to extreme positions. Recently there has developed increasing awareness that many who identify themselves as conservative evangelicals, such as Bernard Ramm, share the

discomfort with some forms of fundamentalism, and that their reasons for their self-identification are worthy of the highest respect from all Christians. All have much to gain from dialogue with this community.

Ramm's book can contribute to overcoming lingering suspicions about the intellectual honesty and authentic openness to evidence on the part of conservative evangelicals. He himself recognizes that these suspicions have not always been groundless, and he is deeply committed to freeing conservative evangelicalism from the taint of obscurantism. To whatever extent Ramm's proposals are accepted—or are responded to in a similar non-obscurantist spirit—we can look forward to a new era. Any continuing condescension toward conservative evangelicals and their scholarship will then express uninformed prejudice.

Ramm is surely correct that the position of the greatest Christian theologian of our century embodies most of what is authentically of concern to conservative evangelicals while being completely free from the obscurantism that is so offensive both to him and to ecumenically-oriented scholars. I have nothing but praise for Ramm's commendation of Barth to this community. Neo-orthodoxy swept the field in this

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country precisely because it presented itself (especially through Emil Brunner) as a way to incorporate the intellectual honesty and openness of liberal scholarship within a powerful affirmation of the historic faith. Barth's achievement remains the towering one.

I am asked to comment, however, as a non-Barthian. Why do I not believe that Barth has spoken the final word or pointed in the right direction for all future Christian thinking? I will list six reasons.

(1) I cannot separate questions of cosmology from those of theology in the way that Barth does. At this point I hope there is some continuing resistance to Barth by conservative evangelicals. I hope also that their encounter with the truly contemporary state of cosmology will free them from excessive attachment to Newtonianism and the accompanying modern form of supernaturalism. I believe (with Pannenberg) that there are encouraging convergences between contemporary cosmology and the general worldview of the Bible.

(2) I am a Wesleyan, and this leads me to unhappiness with some of Barth's doctrines. I will not elaborate, but I hope a move toward Barth will not force out of conservative evangelicalism what I take to be solid theological advances in the understanding of sin and grace since Calvin. In my opinion Wesley offers us a way of avoiding the Barthian tendency to universalism, about which Ramm is rightly concerned, without either returning to any sort of doctrine of double election or weakening emphasis on the primacy of divine agency in salvation.

(3) Since 1965 many Barthians have felt it to be important to establish a different relationship between history and eschatology than that of their master. Jürgen Moltmann is the most influential figure in this development. Barth's formulations served brilliantly as a rallying point against the Nazification of the church, but they serve less well the needs of the oppressed in the Third World. From my point of view the shift expressed in the theology of hope is an important and needed move beyond Barth. I hope conservative evangelicals can be open to this.

(4) Barth was staunchly opposed to Nazi anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, viewed in light of recent Holocaust studies his own doctrines about the relation of Christ to Israel are not above criticism. I hope conservative evangelicals will work sensitively in this area to avoid some of the pitfalls of which Barth was not nearly as aware as we should now be.

(5) Barth's treatment of other world religions removes the objectionable condescension characteristic of much earlier Christian thinking. It removes any idea of the superiority of Christianity, Christendom, or Christians. Nevertheless, its form of Christocentricity places the achievements of other traditions outside the sphere of salvation

history altogether. The influence of Barth on the World Council of Churches has limited its readiness to listen to the religious insights of other traditions. I hope those who now turn to Barth for guidance can avoid these restrictions.

(6) As our consciousness is raised about the patriarchal character of our Jewish and Christian heritage, few of our influential theologians escape severe criticism. However, on some points Barth's patriarchalism is egregious. It would not be wise to turn to Barth for help on theological direction without being aware of fundamental objections to his theology on this score.

None of this is intended as opposition to Ramm's proposal that conservative evangelicals can turn for help from fundamentalism to Barth. I believe this will be an excellent next step for many evangelicals. It is intended as a suggestion that Barth does not offer a permanent resting place. In due course we will need another book entitled "after Barth." However critical many conservative evangelicals may be of specific doctrines of "process" theology, it is well to remember that their theological tradition, like all theological traditions, is "in process."

Review by Carl F. H. Henry

Although Bernard Ramm gives fundamentalist theology last rites at the very time Jerry Falwell heralds its revivification, the thrust of Ramm's book lies elsewhere. Ramm promotes Barthian theology (in distinction from both evangelical orthodoxy and fundamentalism) as the best model for coping christianly with the intellectual impact of the Enlightenment. He focuses especially on the way Barth responds to the Enlightenment erosion of supernatural theism.

Ramm's is not the only or the most complete abstract of Barth's views, but it is nonetheless a highly readable survey that concentrates on some important issues where evangelical and Barthian thought intersect. Preachers will profit from the chapter on "Preaching," moralists will profit from the chapter on "Ethics," and dispensationalists will be angered by the appendix on Lewis Sperry Chafer and Barth. Ramm criticizes Van Til for putting Barth in the worst light and Chafer (in effect) for ignoring Barth altogether. Ramm, by contrast, puts Barth in the best light; others' criticisms are overstated to accommodate a hurried defense. Ramm too much overlooks changes in Barth's own thought (e.g., "Barth . . . has always argued that revelation is rational") as well as the costly effect of Barth's early existential

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enthusiasm. Moreover, Ramm underplays the dialectical elements even in Barth's final formulations.

On some issues Ramm does criticize Barthian perspectives. He rejects supralapsarianism (without wrestling with Barth's criticism of sublapsarianism) while ignoring Barth's reconstruction of the doctrine of a divine supertemporal election of individuals. Ramm grants that radical biblical criticism may overwhelm Barth's insistence that criticism cannot impair the content of revelation, yet he still endorses Barth's approach. He considers Barth too ambiguous on the theme of universalism and is prone to exclude Schleiermacher along with some other theological goats. He suspects that Barth was less independent of philosophy than Barth acknowledged. Finally, Ramm thinks Barth "overloads his theology with Christology," but he does not develop

the criticism.

Aside from these few exceptions, Ramm seems to opt for Barthian alternatives. The point at which evangelicals will consent is the insistence that we must not force human beings to choose between evangelical faith and true learning. Any worthy theology—in contrast to mechanical repetition of one's beliefs—is an agonizing task that calls for our serious wrestling with the dominant ideas and ideals of our age.

Ramm wishes to preserve both modern learning and the Christian faith. Unfortunately, he does not precisely define what is "valid in modern learning," although he does accuse contemporary evangelicals of glossing over it. Furthermore, both liberal Protestantism before Barth and then religious humanism claimed to have made peace with modern learning. Barth's academic impact, notably, has been felt more fully by loosely-anchored evangelicals than by modernists and humanists.

The central problem, Ramm says, is the authority in a scientific age of a prescientific book. "How can the children of the computer-electronic revolution admit divine authority to the Holy Scriptures written in much more primitive times?" The inherited view, says Ramm, is challenged by "biblical criticism . . . historical science . . . modern astronomy . . . the new geology . . . the theory of evolution . . . scientific historical knowledge . . . philosophies . . . new opinions." These are imposing generalizations. Ramm seeks nonetheless to know how both the biblical and modern accounts can be true, and he categorizes as obscurantist castigation any suggestion that the scientists are wrong. With Barth, Ramm insists that historical and literary criticism are to be granted their rightful place without surrendering the theological integrity of Scripture; with Barth he presumes to achieve this by the verdict that both the ancient and the modern accounts "are true in their own way."

Ramm apparently joins with Schleiermacher and Barth in affirming that an inerrant Scripture is indefensible: cultural-linguistic considerations influentially shape, determine, govern and limit all human thought (even Ramm's?) (p. 54); the biblical text is culture-conditioned (p. 57); we must reject "the perfection of biblical history," whatever that means (p. 97); human language imperfectly mirrors the Word of God (but not of Ramm?) (p. 109). The Word must be *sought* (p. 112), but Ramm does not tell us how in these circumstances it is assuredly cognizable since biblical text is declared errant even in the original (p. 109). If Scripture is declared errant because revelation comes in human language, is not Jesus' teaching (which we now know only in Scripture) likewise errant? And where does Jesus—or the apostles—affirm that Scripture is errant? Or is their "witness" untrustworthy? Ramm seems to hold with Barth that "the Son of God took actual sinful humanity in the incarnation" and that, "if to be human is to err," Scripture is vulnerable to error (p. 127).

Ramm criticizes the evangelical emphasis on propositional revelation as presupposing "a pure conceptual language" (p. 110). He then implies that Barth teaches propositional revelation (p. 113) and insists that Barth holds to "the objective authority of Scripture and Scripture as the Word of God." But the matter is not so simple; the complexity Barth adds, in fact, is what vulnerably complicates his theology.

If the Christian revelation is not amenable to any test for truth, moreover, as Ramm insists along with Barth (p. 75), and if every test of revelation is to be deplored as rationalism (p. 86), then no logical basis exists any longer for preferring Christian to Muslim or Mormon claims of revelation. If one cannot know the truth of revelation before one appropriates it, Christianity forfeits any apologetic confrontation of the unbeliever. In this respect, and in excluding revelation from the cosmos that scientists probe and from the history that historians investigate, Barth capitulated to implications of the Enlightenment which he heroically resisted at other levels. In light of such concessions which Ramm would make to Barth and to the Enlightenment, it would be useful if Ramm were now to provide a constructive exposition of theology from his neo-evangelical quasi-Barthian perspective.

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