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Though this flock appears to be divided into different folds, yet they are kept within enclosures which are common to all believers, who are scattered throughout the whole world; because the same word is preached to all, they use the same sacraments, they have the same order of prayer, and everything that belongs to the profession of faith.

—JOHN CALVIN

Be united with other Christians. A wall with loose bricks is not good. The bricks must be cemented together.

—CORRIE TEN BOOM

It is best to be with those in time we hope to be with in eternity.

—THOMAS FULLER

A REVIEW ARTICLE

John H. Armstrong

THE REMAKING OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Gary Dorrien

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press (1998).

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Twentieth-century academic treatments of contemporary theology generally pass over evangelical theologians with little interest. Gary Dorrien, a self-described Anglican social-gospeler and dialectical theologian, views the subject he describes here "from outside, but not as a stranger" (11). In the Introduction Dorrien provides the reader with a general sense of the direction his thought will take by candidly writing:

With help from its Barthian and postmodern interlocutors, evangelical theology is casting off some of the more dubious vestiges of its scholastic and fundamentalist inheritance, reminding the church today, as John Robinson assured his Puritan followers, that God still has more light and truth to break forth from his Word (11).

Dorrien concludes, accurately, I believe, that fundamentalist evangelical leaders see "the rethinking of evangelical claims currently under way" as a "disaster." He sees this present tension, among more conservative theo-

gians, rather as "the creative ferment" which demonstrates not an approaching death blow but rather "a sign of health and vitality in a postmodern situation" (11). You must decide if you agree, for sure, but do not miss Dorrien's careful, critical and sympathetic survey, whether you agree with his presuppositions or not. This is, simply put, a well-written, well-conceived, readable interaction with the historical currents and contemporary state of evangelical thought, especially regarding the authority of Scripture.

In the space of only six pages Dorrien begins his story by setting a context. In this he shows how the revivalistic/evangelical style of D. L. Moody was altered toward the end of the last century into what eventually became a more combative and scholastic approach by the turn of the century. Dorrien then takes us back to the sixteenth-century continental Reformers and their view of infallibility, attempting to show differences between their approach to Scripture with that of more scholastic Reformed thinkers who arose in later centuries. This story is traced to Charles Hodge and the Princeton tradition. His argument is not new, and has been variously proposed and debated, but it is succinctly and elegantly told by a careful writer.

Dorrien then turns attention to dispensationalism, with its unique brand of hermeneutics. He concludes that its distinctive teaching was threefold. Dorrien's conclusions regarding this system of theological interpretation (for this is what it *really* is) demonstrate his ability to cut to the chase rather effectively. He argues that this popular system "turned the Bible into a kind of secret code containing divine messages about the future of the world." He follows this by showing that "it decentered the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ by consigning these events to the period of the law." Third, "it nullified the previous nineteen centuries of biblical interpretation" (29).

The story of how early fundamentalism eventually grew

out of both Princeton theology and dispensationalism follows. Dorrien demonstrates that the doctrine of inerrancy, which eventually became so central to fundamentalism, was not always a cardinal tenet to early fundamentalist authors (e.g., the views of prominent British conservative theologians, James Orr and James Denny). Though Dorrien's account might be challenged by some contemporary evangelical apologists, *this* observation is clearly true.

By mid-century Dorrien notes that most of the institutions of fundamentalism were "defensive and provincial" (49). Enter the birth and development of Fuller Theological Seminary in the late 1940s. With Harold John Ockenga and Charles E. Fuller, two prominent preachers of the era, struggling to rebuild the image and position of fundamentalism, the situation began to change. Here Dorrien is at his very best. He tells the story of how evangelical apologists eventually saw the only serious choice for Christians was between the authority of divine revelation and the authority of scientific reason. "If the Bible is not true in all that it affirms about nature, history, and geography, Carnell insisted, there is no point in attempting to save some remnant of Christian belief from the reach of scientific rationalism" (61). Apologists increasingly insisted that Christianity was logically consistent. Respected evangelical thinker E. J. Carnell, following J. Gresham Machen, defined faith as "a resting of the soul *in the sufficiency of the evidence*" (62, emphasis mine). Carnell, deeply influenced by two seminal evangelical apologists, Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til, eventually took sides on issues that had divided these two theologians; e.g., for Clark the purpose of apologetics was largely negative while for Van Til the point was to expose the contradictions of non-Christian systems of thought. I find Dorrien's presentation of the influence of "rationality" upon these influential thinkers to be quite compelling. Passion for "logic" often drove the agenda of

fundamentalism much more than the Christ-centeredness of divine revelation given by the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. Eventually it was Carnell himself who turned further and further away from fundamentalism, actually labeling this twentieth-century expression of faith as "orthodoxy gone cultic," a line that infuriated many in the 1950s. The contemporary recovery of Reformed theology could learn from the survey of this interchange.

The story then takes us to the 1960s and the rise of a carefully defined epistemology articulated by one of evangelicalism's most respected spokesmen, Carl F.H. Henry. Following the way set out by Gordon Clark, Carl Henry saw the comprehensive structure of biblical revelation as the foundational premise of Christianity, *not* the resurrection of Christ. "Henry thus sided with the presuppositional side of the evangelical debate between presuppositionalists and evidentialists" (108). Dorrien argues that for Carl Henry, "it was the human will, not human reason, that stands utterly in need of divine regeneration" (108). It is reason, a divinely given gift, which allows human beings "to recognize the truth of revelation" (109). For Henry, argues Dorrien, "to make theological inquiry dependent on belief is to consign theology to a ghetto of religious feeling" (109). Henry argued, in his own words, that "the new birth is not prerequisite to a knowledge of the truth of God" (109). Out of this epistemological background, Dorrien shows, debates regarding inerrancy arose in the 1970s.

The remainder of Dorrien's survey follows several lines. He looks at the interesting twists in the road followed by both the late Bernard Ramm and Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock, two erstwhile fundamentalist theologians who departed rather significantly by the 1980s from their earlier written work [e.g., Bernard Ramm's clearly inerrantist *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (1970) with his *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (1983),

and Clark Pinnock's inerrantist *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology* (1971) with *The Scripture Principle* (1984)]. There can be little doubt that all evangelicals were not of one mind regarding how to define and explain the biblical doctrine of inspiration. (Some began to insist that the term evangelical could not be properly used to describe any theology/ theologian who denied inerrancy as defined by the Princeton tradition.)

Dorrien then surveys several Wesleyan perspectives on Scripture; e.g., his helpful presentation of William J. Abraham's attempts to emphasize several differences between inerrancy rationalism, so-called, and the spirit of John Wesley's pietistic evangelicalism. Calvinists, who rightly disagree with this perspective, could stand a much better understanding of it. Dorrien will be of great help at this point, especially if you are not able to read Abraham's massive work on this subject (e.g., *Canon and Criterion*, Oxford University Press, 1999).

Dorrien then demonstrates how a more catholic tradition arose within evangelicalism through the work of writers such as Robert Webber and Donald G. Bloesch. Here again his grasp of the people, the movements and the issues is succinct and profoundly helpful. The fairness with which he allows these various theologians *to speak for themselves* is commendable. Whether you agree with Dorrien or not you will find that he packs remarkable insight into paragraph after paragraph. (I found myself often reading this book as if it were a detective story, even though I know some of the principal actors and knew how the story would end!)

The final chapter is titled "Postconservative Evangelicalism: Dialogues in Search of a Generous Orthodoxy." Here conservative readers will be troubled by some of Dorrien's proposals. He surveys modern options for the further development of an evangelical view of biblical authority. I

found myself disagreeing with some of Dorrien's directions, yet engaged to think anew about the task and goals of a biblically sensitive theology. Quite a bit of Dorrien's overview takes up the thought of theologian Donald G. Bloesch, one of our most engaging and helpful modern evangelical theologians (e.g., his present on-going series, *Christian Foundations*, published by InterVarsity Press). Here Dorrien accurately notes Bloesch's argument regarding inerrancy:

... that the term has become a barrier to theological communication, [thus] evangelicals should stop appealing to inerrancy on a persistent basis. At the same time, they must not relinquish their belief that scripture is inerrant in its union with the Spirit. This does not mean, he explains, that infallibility resides wholly in the text of scripture, as in fundamentalism. Nor does it mean that infallibility resides exclusively in the Spirit that speaks to Christians as they read the Bible or listen to the Word proclaimed. The kind of neoorthodoxy that makes the latter claim falls short of authentic evangelicalism, he cautions. The infallibility of scripture lies instead in the paradoxical unity of Word and Spirit. The scriptural text is infallible as the Holy Spirit speaks in and through it. The Bible employs modes of expression that are sometimes problematic, but the message that it conveys through its union with the Spirit transcends culture and history. It is infallible (*fallere*) by virtue of its certainty not to deceive (192).

Dorrien refers to this new evangelical approach to theology as "postfundamentalist." He cites writers such as Thomas Oden, a Methodist who is leading the way back to serious engagement with the thought of the church fathers, and Alister McGrath, a contemporary Anglican evangelical, who maintains serious optimism about the future of the evangelical cause (e.g., *A Passion for Truth*, InterVarsity

Press, 1996), as additional representatives of this newer way.

Many contemporary evangelicals will not share Dorrien's proposals but the value of his work must not be discounted. Let me explain.

Postmodernism is a serious threat to the church in this present age. But this development also provides a *special* moment in history for serious evangelical Christians. Postmodernism tells us that no observer actually stands outside the historical process. This, as Stanley Grenz has previously written and Gary Dorrien suggests, provides us with "a Christian theme." Grenz has written: "Postmodern epistemologists are actually echoing Augustine when they assert that our personal convictions and commitments not only color our search for knowledge but also facilitate the process of understanding" (quoted on p. 194). Dorrien correctly adds, "Reason is the servant of interest, and even the most objective search for knowledge is conditioned by our personal convictions and circumstances" (194). Grenz cites, properly I conclude, that Carl Henry's approach epitomizes the problems faced by postconservative evangelicals. "In keeping with the rationalist tradition in theology, Henry elevates reason to the status of being the foundational dimension of the human person" (195). The problem with this perspective is that it perpetuates the Enlightenment idea of a rationalized world, a perspective that is quite plainly crumbling in the postmodern context. Grenz, as with other postconservative writers surveyed by Dorrien, suggests that evangelicalism should *not* replace a rationalist model with a narrative-community model, but evangelicals must begin to emphasize the *primacy* of narrative in Scripture, a fact that seems indisputable to my mind. Further, the distinctive biblical character of community must also be regained if evangelical theology is to be more consciously rooted in both the Bible and the modern context. In

Grenz's words, ". . . the theological task can be properly pursued only 'from within'—that is, only from the vantage point of the faith community in which the theologian stands" (195).

Dorrien offers an intriguing and helpful warning to evangelicals:

Evangelicals are prone to fret that everything will be lost if they have no ground of absolute certainty or no proof that Christianity is superior to Islam or Buddhism. This fear drives them to impose impossible tests on Christian belief. Inerrancy or the abyss! It also drives them to invest religious authority in a posited epistemological capacity that exists outside the circle of Christian faith. The truth of Christianity is then judged by rational tests that are not only external to Christian revelation but given authority over revelation. Under the influence of antifoundationalist criticism and the judgment that conservative evangelicalism unnecessarily jeopardizes Christian conviction, however, a new generation of evangelical thinkers is giving up the claim to objective foundational knowledge (201).

Dorrien, it should be remembered, declares himself to be *outside* the evangelical tradition. He poses an important question to our tradition this way: "[Is it] enough to claim the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, as our foundation in a lost and tormented world, without thinking that this claim has to be grounded in a deeper, universal foundation [?]" (201). The simple fact is this—evangelicals no longer live in the context of Enlightenment rationalism. Dorrien accurately notes that "Few thinkers still criticize Christian faith in the name of pure reason" (202). If we are to build a distinctly evangelical theological perspective in the next generation we have to take this type of thinking seriously, regardless of how much we agree or disagree with some of the distinctive doctrines of its proponents, e.g., Clark Pinnock's

views on annihilation or the openness-of-God proposal, both of which rightly trouble those concerned with exegesis and biblical categories.

Dorrien will put off rigid evangelicals, who will likely see concern for the issues discussed here as troubling. He will help evangelicals who want to understand better how we got to our present place in historical development. He will also raise serious and troubling questions about the place of reason in theological method. Finally, he will help all who are exercised about how the church can relate the gospel effectively to postmoderns.

To my mind, one of the best ways to find out if an author has properly stated the views of various thinkers is to ask those particular thinkers if the author has properly grasped and clearly stated their particular views. In the case of several of the prominent theologians surveyed by Dorrien I have had opportunity to ask this question. The answer has invariably been that Gary Dorrien has gotten it right and has thus fairly surveyed the field of contemporary evangelical theology. You may well disagree with Dorrien's proposals, even strongly at times, but you will be hard pressed to find a better and fairer treatment of the issue of biblical authority as set forth by twentieth-century evangelical theologians.

EDITOR