

THEOLOGICAL PROGRESS AND EVANGELICAL COMMITMENT

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Does theology still have a frontier or has its frontier long since been closed? Is our situation theologically like that of the United States in 1800 with vast areas unexplored and unannexed? Or is our situation more akin to that of the United States in the second half of the 20th century with the whole continent from ocean to ocean and from Mexico to Canada mapped out in detail and thoroughly cultivated except for isolated patches of desert and wilderness? At this hour in Christian history is the theologian merely a prosaic cultivator of old farms and orchards or is he a pioneer blazing new trails into regions of truth as yet unpossessed? This, I gather, is the problem which I am to discuss with you from the evangelical perspective.

Now from our perspective, committed as we are to a thoroughgoing Biblicism, this problem has certain facets and complications which liberal theologians largely ignore. As disciples of empiricism in one of its several forms, they believe that truth is perpetually in process of being made. And since they therefore sit very loosely to Scripture, they view themselves as pioneers forever moving Westward. Their frontier is wide open; with Schelling they agree that the pursuit rather than the possession of truth is man's highest privilege.

But as an evangelical I must assert at the outset of this address that the theological frontier is not wide open. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the territory of special revelation has been painstakingly explored and charted by 20 centuries of dedicated scholarship. As a result, the need for a pioneering spirit among Biblicists seems anachronistic; what we need apparently is the patient spirit of the farmer or perhaps the fighting spirit of the patriot who seeks to protect his country from invasion by religious Bolsheviks.

Take up, for example, that masterful study which James Orr published exactly 60 years ago, *The Progress of Dogma*. In it, as he traces the evolution of theology across the ages, he makes this statement:

We have to recognize the fact that our fathers have labored, and we have entered into their labors; that history has been in travail with these subjects for the past nineteen centuries, and has brought forth more than wind; that we are not dealing with human speculations, but with a divine revelation, the records of which have been in men's hands from the beginning, and on which men's minds have been directed with the intense desire and prayer for light; that Christ promised His Spirit to His disciples to guide them into truth, and not first to scholars of the nineteenth century; and that the presumption—practically the certainty—is, that the great decisive landmarks in theology are already fixed, and that we are not called upon, nor will be able, to remove them. It is, of course, always open, even in science, to a man to frame a theory which goes on the assumption that all the developments of the past have been wrong—that, e. g., the earth is not a sphere, and that the Copernican theory of the heavens is a mistake—but we generally regard him as not wise! Within limits, it should not be otherwise in theology. The men behind us have laid the foundations, and we must be content, I take it, to build on the foundations they have laid. This leaves us still vast work to do, but it is not their work. We shall not make less progress by realising that there is firm footing for us in the past to start from. We may take encouragement from those who have gone before us that our labor need not be in vain.¹

Temporarily I shall ignore Orr's remark that vast work remains to be done. I shall emphasize solely his insistence that "the great decisive landmarks in theology are al-

ready fixed" and that consequently we must now carry on our own intellectual labor within this settled framework. As he says elsewhere in that same book:

The thing which confronts us when we look into the matter is, that in all the great Protestant Churches there is a system of doctrine in possession—a system professedly based on Scripture, and embodied, in its essentials, in the acknowledged Reformation Creeds. I do not, of course, argue that, because a doctrine is found in any or all of these creeds, it is necessarily true; but what I do say is, that when we are in search of a criterion to determine what does, and what does not, belong to the genuine doctrinal content of Christianity, this practically consentient body of doctrine in the great Church Creeds is not a fact to be ignored—is, indeed, a weighty fact to start from—one which gives that body of doctrine a strong *prima facie* claim on our consideration.²

Yet much as he values the body of dogma which has evolved in the ongoing of the Christian Church, Orr does not hold that it precludes further development. Quite the contrary! Recall his remark that we still have a vast work to do. Yet in doing this work we must not undo the work which has already been done. "The history of dogma," he cautions us, "criticizes dogma; corrects mistakes, eliminates temporary elements, supplements defects, incorporates the gains of the past, at the same time that it opens up wider horizons for the future. But its clock never goes back."³

Then in order to guard himself against misinterpretation Orr flatly avows, "I am no opponent of real progress in theology."⁴ Notice, though, the qualification he puts upon progress. Much alleged progress, he contends, is not a development but a regressive malformation, a parasitic growth upon the organism of truth. Holding fast to our territorial metaphor, let me say that Orr in 1901 did not consider the theological frontier closed. He saw wide horizons stretching out before the evangelical.

In order to come to grips with our problem, I turn now to a text published in 1955, slightly more than fifty years after *The Progress of Dogma*. I am using this text because its author does not stand within our tradition. Precisely where he does stand may be difficult to determine since doctrinal taxonomy is confessedly troublesome. But I suspect that Walter Marshall Horton is comfortably at home in the tenets of neo-orthodoxy. Be that as it may, his *Christian Theology: An Ecumenical Approach* will prove most helpful to us as we examine the evangelical frontier today. It will show in what areas a neo-orthodox scholar thinks Christian truth has not yet been formulated with any fixity. It will furnish an excellent foil by which we as Biblicists can evaluate our own position. And, besides this, Horton may unintentionally disclose that many of our contemporaries are actually setting back the clock, rejuvenating old error in the name of new truth.

In our day, then, according to Horton, a tremendous ferment is taking place in Protestantism. So he says, "Any book written before the First World War broke out, before the name of Karl Barth was heard of must fall to orient theological students to the prevailing thought currents and burning issues of the second half of the 20th century."⁵ Yet from this ferment, strangely enough, a consensus is emerging. Sectarian viewpoints and parochial ideas are giving way to a catholicity of conviction; dogma, insofar as it has crystallized, is encouragingly ecumenical. Oh, to be sure, there are some basic conflicts, Horton admits, "differences of such magnitude and such fundamental importance that they divide contemporary Christians into major types of faith and order, distinguished by characteristic concepts of essential Christianity." These major types he classifies as Catholic, Conservative Protestant, Liberal Protestant, Radical Protestant, Neo-Orthodox and Anglican; and these six major types, he tells us, further "diverge from one another or two basic issues, the catholic-protestant issue and the conservative-liberal issue."⁶ But leaving such issues aside,

there is an emerging consensus; indeed, Horton ventures to affirm that "a large part of the theological issues historically dividing Protestants into Lutherans, Calvinists, and Arminians, and even a considerable part of the issues dividing Protestants from Catholics, have now become dead issues."⁷ To demonstrate this thesis, he establishes seven rubrics and considers them *ad seriatim*: (1) the knowledge of God, (2) nature of God, (3) God and the world, (4) God and man, (5) Christ the Saviour, (6) the Church and means of grace, (7) the Christian hope.⁸ Now to prevent my use of Horton's book from degenerating into a pedantic review, I shall simply spotlight the living issues, as he calls them, which render the ecumenical consensus less than unanimous. I do this, very obviously, because these issues show where the frontier is not yet closed—from a neo-orthodox perspective at any rate.

First, with respect to the knowledge of God, Horton admits that it is "the most delicately critical issue on which the schools divide,"⁹ particularly when one considers not only how far removed conservatives are from liberals, but also how heatedly supernaturalistic Protestants criticize their more radical brethren. In fact, two positions "stand out as clearly irreconcilable with each other and with the general consensus of Christian thought: the radical empiricism of the American humanists and naturalists and the radical revelationism of Karl Barth."¹⁰ Add to this the conflict between Roman and non-Roman theologies, as Horton labels them, and you begin to understand why he says "there is a great deal of serious and honest divergence among Christians concerning the knowledge of God."¹¹ Evidently, therefore, the consensus in this area is not yet complete; the frontier is still open.

Second, concerning the nature of God, Horton avers that there is "little fundamental disagreement"¹² among theologians. Well, perhaps more than a little disagreement must be conceded. After all, a vigorous debate is being carried on regarding the place of Greek metaphysics in Christian faith, and a theologian as eminent as Gustaf Aulen protests that religion "has nothing to do with metaphysics,"¹³ and that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ cannot be equated with the *Actus Purus* of Aristotle. Furthermore, the personality of God is strenuously controverted by front-rank thinkers like Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman who refuse to apply personal categories to deity. Permit me here to allude hastily to a recent article by A. Campbell Garnett, "Is Modern Theology Atheistic?" He reports that in May, 1960 the Western Division of the American Philosophy Association meeting at Chicago debated the question "Is Tillich An Atheist?" And in Garnett's own words, employing as a criterion the God of the Hebrew-Christian tradition, "The distinguished symposiasts, Paul Holmes, Charles Hartshorne, and Marvin Fox, all well known as philosophical defenders of the faith, were none of them ready to affirm that what Tillich has to say of God meets this test in a way they could find satisfactory."¹⁴ If so crucial an issue as the very nature of God has not yet been resolved by Protestant theologians, the frontier, I assume, must still be open fairly wide!

Third, reverting to Horton, I consider next his discussion of cosmology or the relationship between God and the world. Ecumenical Christianity, he assures us, has adjusted itself successfully to the revolutionary discoveries and theories of modern science. Then he writes:

Creation, providence and prayer are doctrines where there is a common core of agreement among the Christian churches. It cannot be said, however, that there is agreement concerning the proper adjustment between these doctrines and the contemporary state of scientific knowledge and human history. The violent controversies aroused by the Darwinian theory in the latter part of the 19th century have somewhat subsided, but many of the issues then raised have continued to divide theologians in our century, while the focus of attention has

shifted from natural history to human history, and from biology to physics and psychology.¹⁵

Hence miracle continues to be a continental-divide among theologians with, for instance, Karl Heim and C. S. Lewis, on the one hand, arguing for a supernatural invasion of the natural order, and Douglas Clyde Macintosh, on the other hand, insisting that if suspensions of the natural order did occur the whole cosmic system “would be upset and the development of intelligence and moral character made impossible,” while prayer under such conditions would degenerate into magic.¹⁶

Another aspect of cosmology which causes tension is the age-old mystery of evil. To relax this tension some contemporary theologians, typified by Peter Bertocci, are advocating belief in a God less than omnipotent. But, Horton points out, the doctrine of a finite deity polarizes “Christian thought, both conservative and liberal into two contrasting viewpoints, not easily united into one synoptic view.”¹⁷ In cosmology, therefore, we find that the frontier of theology is not yet closed.

In the fourth place, is an ecumenical position emerging with respect to the interaction of God and man? Unquestionably so, Horton alleges. Opinions are by no means entirely harmonious, as he puts it, yet we must realize “the high degree of consensus actually existing on this subject among Christian theologians While the Christian consensus concerning God and man falls short of unanimity at some important points, it is sufficiently clear in its main outlines to offer a clear challenge and a needed corrective to the modern view of man.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, though, this consensus which approximates unanimity is, so Horton concedes, marred by “real differences . . . rising to the point of flat contradiction.”¹⁹

And, of course, in honesty one must acknowledge that there is a continuing controversy in Christian thought, which has appeared in different forms at different periods in Church history and flared up again in our own time over the doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin.²⁰

Neither must the more liberal theologian forget this: “There are conservative Protestants who would insist that if the Bible is really the Word of God, Adam must be a historical character and his fall a dated fact.”²¹

So in anthropology the consensus is not yet complete and the frontier is still open.

Once more, is a genuinely catholic view of Christ the Saviour, Who He was and what He did, being hammered out on the ecumenical forge? Yes, indeed! Yes, indeed, but—! But what? Well, granting that the churches in the World Council “accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour,” it cannot be denied that even so succinct a formula, I quote Horton, “is open to serious objection and misunderstanding.”²² Something else is likewise undeniable, and again I quote Horton: “There is room for serious debate among Christians as to the exact meaning of the common Christian faith that in Jesus the Christ ‘true man’ and ‘true God’ met and were one.”²³

Moreover, it is undeniable “that neo-orthodox Christians like Brunner and Aulen, express the most ardent and unwavering faith in the incarnation while remaining skeptical and unconcerned about the Virgin Birth;”²⁴ and accordingly Horton suggests that this doctrine be demoted “to an optional, second-rate position.”²⁵

Nor is it true that on the central matter of the atonement any consensus yet exists, a fact which prompts Horton to state in italics: “No one theory of the Work of Christ has ever won its way to such general acceptance as the Nicene-Chalcedonian, theory of the Person of Christ has received.”²⁶

Then, if a serious attempt is to be made at reconciling Protestants and Catholics, Mariology no doubt presents a problem. But Horton hopes this can be solved. How? By taking a cue from Judaism which “did not wholly reject the idea of subordinate messengers (angels) and mediators.” In similar fashion, therefore, Protestantism can incorporate into itself the essence of Mariology by extending “the principle of subordinate mediatorship.”²⁷

Though it is not my function in this context to be critical, I note with amazement the capacity of liberated theologians to strain out the Biblical gnats while they readily swallow unBiblical camels. But, Horton himself being witness, one fact is unmistakable: in Christology the frontier is still open.

Moving now to the doctrine of ecclesiology, or the Church and the means of grace, Horton discovers a substratum of theological agreement; yet he laments, as evangelicals likewise do, that “Here, above all, Christians are divided, not only into schools of thought but into separate bodies, between which there is no full and free communion.”²⁸ Regarding the differences in this area, he says, “There is, frankly, no immediate hope whatsoever of these being resolved.”²⁹ And what are these differences? Horton mentions “Infant and adult baptism, open and closed communion, apostolic succession, possibility of salvation outside the Church, possibility of more than one organized Church, necessity of having bishops, necessity of having seven sacraments, feet-washing as an extra sacrament, unimportance or basic importance of correct church government and church discipline.”³⁰ But these differences, serious as they have been and may be, are not the deepest difference; that, as defined by the Amsterdam Assembly, is the “catholic-protestant” difference. In this area, then, it seems as though the theological frontier is still wide open.

Finally, can it be asserted that a consensus has emerged with respect to the Christian hope? Here Horton is somewhat hard pressed to discover a common core of belief, especially so because of the conflict between “American activity” and Continental quietists with their “radically different conception of the Kingdom of God,” and, more especially so, because the immanent Christ is hard to reconcile with the apocalyptic Christ.³¹ He feels, nevertheless, that a balanced viewpoint is gradually evolving, “a tenable and necessary position for modern Christians to take.”³²

Unresolved issues in eschatology are three. For one thing, will the Second Coming of Christ be crassly literal and, if not, how is it to be interpreted? Next, can we hold to universal salvation or must we believe that God’s love is finally frustrated, with same human beings suffering eternal punishment? Third, must we abandon all hope for the betterment of the world now that “the Utopian illusions of the early 20th century have been duly discounted?”³³ In view of these issues, Horton concludes that the area of eschatology is still open.

That is not only Horton’s opinion: it is likewise the opinion of Norman Pittinger who, defending universal salvation in *The Christian Century*, declared that the doctrine of future things is “an enormous item of unfinished business on the church’s theological (not to say pastoral) agenda. Have we really, seriously, earnestly, wrestled with what it means to believe that the ultimate ground of being, the determiner of all destiny, the lord of heaven and earth, is nothing other than the all-sovereign love which in Jesus Christ, for us men, and for our wholeness, was incarnate amongst us, lived with us, died in order that men might share his life, and lives evermore as the guarantee of the reality of that which he came to reveal and to do?”³⁴

One need not endorse Pittinger’s universalism to endorse his plea for a more strenuous wrestling with the issues of eschatology. Over a half century ago Orr re-

marked, "The modern mind has given itself with special earnestness to eschatological questions, moved thereto, perhaps, by the solemn impression that on it the ends of the world have come, and that some great crisis in the history of human affairs is approaching."³⁵ And after 60 years this area is still crying out for further study. Here, all of us will concur, the frontier is still open.

Now what conclusion can we draw from this survey of a representative text in contemporary theology written within an ecumenical and neo-orthodox framework? I think Horton makes clear that Protestantism in our day has permitted even its central fixities to become far too fluid. Instead of being progressive, it has actually turned back the clock by rejuvenating a host of old errors in the name of new truth. To cite a specific case, the neo-naturalism of Paul Tillich—that is Nels Ferre's term³⁶—ponderously updates an ancient type of gnosticism. Why, then, hail it as progressive? Real progress, the progress Orr called for and furthered, can be made only as we build upon foundations already securely laid down. To raze the foundations every ten years in the hope of building better is equivalent to the digging up the dahlia bulb every morning to ascertain its rate of growth. May I quote from Orr again?

There is still room for fresh developments in theology. Existing systems are not final; as works of human understanding they are necessarily imperfect; there is none which is not in some degree affected by the nature of the intellectual environment, and the factors the mind had, at the time of its formation, to work with. I do not question, therefore, that there are still sides and aspects of divine truth to which full justice has not yet been accorded; improvements that can be made in our conception and formulation of all the doctrines, and in their correlation with each other. All I am contending for is, that such a development shall be a development *within* Christianity, and not *away* from it; that it shall recognize its connection with the past, and unite itself organically with it; and that it shall not spurn the past development, as if nothing of permanent value had been accomplished by it.³⁷

The relevance of Orr's contention for us in 1961 is patent. God help us as evangelicals to be alert to everything in our troubled world, sensitive to its spiritual needs as well as its philosophical problems. God help us to stand on the frontier between Christianity and culture engaging in dialogue, maintaining communication bearing witness intelligently and effectively. God help us as we face the multiplied and staggering challenges of our day. Allow me to mention a few of them.

We face the challenge of science, a challenge which cuts to the deepest levels of our own theological position. For as E. Ashley Johnson crisply expresses the matter:

Theology has presented conclusions about the nature of man and of the physical universe, statements made on the strength of religious authority or derived deductively from basic postulates. The fact that science has found a way of drawing conclusions on these same cosmological and anthropological questions and the fact that these scientific judgments have won almost universal acceptance at the expense of the corresponding theological propositions have done much to discredit the whole enterprise.³⁸

It was the challenge of science which caused Orr to warn in 1901:

There are, indeed, not wanting signs that we are on the eve of new conflicts, in which new solvents will be applied to Christian doctrines, and which may prove anxious and testing to many who do not realize that Christian faith in every age must be a battle. That battle will have to be fought, if I mistake not, in the first instance, round the fortress of the worth and authority of Holy Scripture. A doctrine of Holy Scripture. A doctrine of Scripture adapted to the needs of the

hour is harmonizing the demands at once of science and of faith, is perhaps the most clamant want at present in theology.³⁹

A doctrine of Scripture which harmonizes the demands of both science and faith—that is still a clamant need. Standing on the frontier between Christianity and culture, evangelical theology must do its utmost to meet that challenge.

We also face the challenge of interstellar exploration, a phase of science which may have enormous repercussions upon Christian doctrine. For what if Harlow Shapley is correct?

That this planet is the one and only place where life has emerged would be a ridiculous assumption. Those who know about the number of stars, about the natural way planets are born and the apparently automatic way life emerges when conditions are right—they no longer hesitate to believe that life is a cosmos-wide phenomenon; and that belief is giving many of us reason for rethinking our philosophies of man and his function. Rethinking our religious position. Contemplating a stellar theology.⁴⁰

Suppose Shapley is correct. Then a stellar theology is in order; and I advance the hypothesis that materials for an evangelicalism of a cosmic range are available in the Christology of Paul and John; for as Otto Dilschneider writes in *Das Christliche Weltbild*, the Christ of Paul and John gives "the central meaning wherein all the problems of meaning that man raises in respect to the cosmos are comprehended . . . the Pantocrator who comprehends the whence and whether . . . the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end."⁴¹

Here surely is a frontier for a creative theology which enlarges the periphery of traditional Christology without touching its core.

We face too, the challenge of demythologization, to translate an awkward German compound into barbaric English. Rudolph Bultmann's radical antisupernaturalism is still another application of science to faith. For, as is now notorious, he charges in *Jesus Christ and Mythology*:

The world-view of the Scripture is mythological and is therefore unacceptable to modern man whose thinking has been shaped by science and is therefore no longer mythological. Modern man always makes use of technical means which are the result of science. In case of illness modern man has recourse to physicians, to medical science. In case of economic and political affairs, he makes use of the results of psychological, social, economic and political sciences, and so on. Nobody reckons with direct intervention by transcendent powers . . . man acknowledges as reality only such phenomena or events as are comprehensible within the framework of the rational order of the universe. He does not acknowledge miracles because they do not fit into this lawful order. When a strange or marvelous accident occurs, he does not rest until he has found a rational cause. The contrast between the ancient world-view of the Bible and the modern world-view is the contrast between two ways of thinking, the mythological and the scientific.⁴²

But, as is also notorious, Bultmann negatively demythologizes the New Testament in order to reinterpret it positively in the categories of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, thus forcing people in our scientific age, so he thinks, to make an existential decision.

Certainly evangelicalism must cry out against demythologization. At the same time, however, evangelicalism must ponder the counsel of Amos Wilder in *New Testament Faith for Today*:

Bultmann's formulation at least highlights much that is at the heart of the Gospel and makes possible an effective impact of that Gospel today in many quarters where more traditional versions have lost their appeal. What needs further attention here, however, is the unresolved question as to how far the original language of faith comes into its own in Bultmann's proposal and how far its rights should be safeguarded in any such restatement.⁴³

What is evangelicalism doing to meet the challenge of demythologization? How does it propose to make the traditional version of the Gospel meaningful in a culture shaped and controlled by science?

We face, still further, the challenge of 20th century philosophy, not alone scientific naturalism, but likewise existential phenomenology and also linguistic analysis both of which in their manifold schools are extraordinarily influential. Shall we evangelicals simply ignore the fact that philosophy is now tuned to a new key or shall we follow the example of a noted Roman Catholic, Albert Dondeyne, in his valuable critique, *Contemporary Thought and Christian Faith*?

Whatever the dimensions and causes of the sickness from which our world is suffering, one thing is certain; the task of every man here on earth, and of the Christian in particular, is to fight against evil in all its forms, to heal sicknesses of body as well as of soul, to see a "neighbor" in everyone who suffers and to hasten to soothe his wounds. To cure sickness, however, we must first understand it. We must find out the nature of the sickness and get to know its causes; we must recognize, too, healthy forces which are still present, without whose cooperation even the best remedies may remain ineffective. If it is to be fruitful, then, the Christian apostolate must exert a constant and sincere effort to understand better the world of today. Although it must denounce the failings and errors of our time, it must also recognize its points of greatness, its merits, its insights, or else it may easily lose its grip upon it. This is all the more important when it is remembered that Christianity is not simply one truth among others or one value added to others, but a synthesis of truths and values from the point of view of the ultimate truth and the ultimate sense of things. Because of this, a Christianity which proved incapable of effecting the synthesis between faith and those partial truths and genuine values that it encounters in the world, would be doomed to failure right from the beginning. This, in turn, underlines the importance of a philosophy (and, *a fortiori*, of a theology) that is living and contemporary, one which takes account of aspirations of the modern world and speaks its language.⁴⁴

Is evangelicalism prepared to follow this program? I trust so! It can follow this program without abandoning its own distinctive theology any more than Dondeyne abandons his Roman Catholicism.

We face, in addition, the challenge of Communism. And I am not thinking of Communism now as a political power: I am thinking of it rather as a formidable rival of Christianity on the intellectual plane. I am thinking of Marx's contention that every religion is an ideology, the product of a particular economic order; and we fail completely to take the measure of 20th century atheism until we take the measure of this Marxist criticism. I am thinking also of Joseph Hromadka's book, *Theology Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*. May I quote him somewhat *in extenso*, fully aware that many evangelicals must in all conscience denounce Hromadka's relationship to Communism?

Theology is, I wish to repeat it over and over again, no ideology. It is an effort to interpret, in an adequate and actual way, the Word of the living God and to

understand the past, the present, and the future men and history in the light of the divine Word and the divine events. From the perspective of theology as we understand it, all human divisions, systems, social and political institutions, all philosophical thoughts, find themselves on the same level, on the side of the created world in its corruption and promise.

The dividing line runs not between communists and noncommunists. It runs between the Lord of glory and mercy, on the one hand, and human sinners (whether communists or noncommunists) on the other. Theologically, it is all wrong to see the main line of division between the Christian ideology and civilization, on the one hand, and the non-Christian *Weltanschauung* on the other. It is a real and urgent question whether any idealistic philosophy stands closer to the Christian faith and message than a materialistic method of thinking and analysis. The greatness of theology rests exactly in its humble and sovereign attitude to the present divisions between Christian and non-Christian civilizations, between Christian and non-Christian philosophies, between the Christian and non-Christians way of life. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* What we need is a vigorous, courageous theology that goes in its depth and breadth to the very root of our present situation and avoids any short cut that promises to make the situation of the Christian church easy and secure. What we need is a sharp intellectual insight into the very issues of the present era and of the point where the church and its members have to wage a real spiritual and moral battle for the cause of Christ. Our spiritual and intellectual capacities are as a rule not strong enough. And even those capacities we possess are gradually withering away because of our unwillingness to see the real issues where they are and where they can squarely be met. The older I am, the more grateful I feel for the privilege of being a theologian and of struggling for a right, relevant, and adequate interpretation of the Word of God and of the heritage of the preceding generations.

We are standing within one of the greatest and most responsible struggles with which the church and its theology have ever been confronted, intellectually, spiritually and morally. The demands upon all of us are such that we should forget all the fashionable divisions thrown upon our heads by the political and public climate of our countries and meet where the Lord of our life and history stands and opens our eyes to our mistakes, blunders, prejudices, and to our great chance and promise.⁴⁵

Now some of us may maintain that it is our prerogative and even our duty to denounce Hromadka; but as evangelicals what are we doing, practically and theologically, to show that Christianity is not one more ideology?

We face, yet again, the challenge of religious syncretism. And this, too, is a most formidable challenge. For in this era when our globe is contracting to the dimensions of a neighborhood and our astronauts are beginning to penetrate space, the scandal of particularity, explicit in the Gospel, becomes more and more of a scandal. Why believe that salvation moves exclusively along one narrow corridor of history, through one insignificant tribe of Semites, through the life and death of one Man, through the medium of one Book, and is confined to one planet? Why believe that the adherents of all other religions are in darkness, now and forever, while only the handful of human beings who accept Jesus Christ as evangelically interpreted bask in light? It is against this Christian parochialism that Arnold Toynbee raises strong objection in his Gifford Lectures on *An Historian's Approach to Religion*:

In the world in which we now find ourselves, the adherents of the different living religions ought to be the readier to tolerate, respect, and revere one another's re-

ligious heritages because, in our generation there is not anyone alive who is effectively in a position to judge between his own religion and his neighbour's. An effective judgment is impossible when one is comparing a religion which has been familiar to one in one's home since one's childhood with a religion which one has learned to know from outside in late years. . . . The missions of the higher religions are not competitive; they are complementary. We can believe in our own religion without having to feel that it is the sole repository of truth. We can love it without having to feel that it is the sole means of salvation.⁴⁶

I am willing to risk the prophecy that in the years ahead religious syncretism will grow immensely popular while Christian particularism *pari passu* grows unpopular. How is this threat to be countered by evangelicals who stake everything on Peter's word, "Neither is there salvation in any other"?

Finally, we face the challenge of a nihilistic *Zeitgeist*, so penetratingly analyzed by Helmut Thielicke.⁴⁷ We are living in an age when, as Nietzsche proclaimed, "God is dead," an age which Satre and Camus portray as an age without justice, love, faith, hope, and meaning—an age in which man, left alone with himself, stares onto the abyss. And yet—what a paradox!—this is the age which has produced a new species of unbeliever, described by Arthur Koestler in *The Age of Longing*: the new skeptic is the unbeliever who longs to believe but cannot.⁴⁸ Recognizing, to be sure, that faith is God's gift, what can we evangelicals do to combat nihilism and satisfy the longing of Koestler's paradoxical skeptic? How can we arouse hope in a generation which has abandoned all hope? This is the task which weighs upon us today.

Now let me sum up my somewhat rambling discussion. Between Christianity and contemporary culture there stretches a challenging frontier. Within theology *per se*, however, at least a theology which is Biblically oriented, the frontier has largely been closed though there are still exciting areas to explore and annex. I am afraid, consequently, least we make a shibboleth of progress and thereby sacrifice hard-won truth. Hence I would plead for the whole sphere of dogma what J. I. Packer pleads for Biblical criticism specifically:

Evangelicals do not wish to put the clock back to the days before scientific study began. What they desire is that modern Bible study should be genuinely scientific—that is to say, fully biblical in its method; and their chief complaint against modern criticism is that it so often fails here. It is true that Evangelicals call for a return to principles of Bible study which have a long history in the Christian Church, and for some revision of modern critical methods in the light of them. But that is not because these principles are traditional; it is because they are biblical. There is certainly an arrogant hide-bound type of traditionalism, unthinking and uncritical, which is carnal and devilish. But there is also a respectful willingness to take help from the Church's past in order to understand the Bible in the present; and such traditionalism is spiritual and Christian. Moreover, it is this attitude alone that makes possible real progress in theology; for theology goes forward only by looking back—back through the Church's heritage of teaching to Jesus Christ and His apostles.⁴⁹

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NOTES

1. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1902), p. 32.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
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