EQ 69:1 (1997), 7–38

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Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Problem for Modern Evangelicalism

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In January, 1995, *Time* magazine offered a special report entitled 'The State of the Union'. Keying off the President's address to the Congress, *Time* reported on how citizens are busy remaking America. Among discussions of work, housing, non-English speakers, wealth, crime, education, and the like, was a discussion of religious affiliation. Using a University of Akron Survey Research Center poll (1992), it reported that 25.9% of those in the United States were 'evangelical Protestants'. Listed as a separate category were 'black Protestants' who are often grouped with evangelicals, and 'Roman Catholics,' a group which includes a growing number of persons with theological affinities with evangelical Protestants. It is clear that 'Protestant, Catholic and Jew' no longer is adequate as a descriptor of American religion, and not simply because 1.1% of the American population adhere to a religious faith other than Judaism or Christianity. After years of controversy as to whether 'evangelical' is a definable subsection of the larger landscape of American Christianity, the category seems a necessary one. A third or more of all Americans fit here.

1. Evangelicalism defined

Yet, agreed upon definitions of evangelicalism are difficult to find.[1] Even Billy Graham has been quoted as saying, 'Evangelicalism is a great mosaic God is building, but if you asked me to,

[1] Cf. Mark Noll, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and David Wells, 'Evangelical Theology Today,' *Theology Today* 51, 1995, 495: 'Evangelicalism, like pornography and the political thought of Presidents of the United States, is easier to recognize than to define.'

I'd have a hard time giving you a definition of what it is today."[2] This is the same person about whom Martin Marty has said: Evangelicals are those 'people who find Billy Graham or his viewpoints acceptable."[3] In his introduction to *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, George Marsden describes 'the evangelical denomination' (his chapter title) as a single phenomenon despite its wide diversity. Marsden, like many of us, goes on immediately, however, to delineate 'three distinct, though overlapping senses in which evangelicalism may be thought of as a unity."[4]

a. Theologically

The first use of the term Marsden labels the 'conceptual,' though I prefer the term 'theological,' so as not to bias the description in a rationalistic mode. Understood theologically, evangelicals are those with 'a dedication to the Gospel that is expressed in a personal faith in Christ as Lord, an understanding of the gospel as defined authoritatively by Scripture, and a desire to communicate the gospel both in evangelism and social reform. Evangelicals are those who believe the gospel is to be experienced personally, defined biblically, and communicated passionately."[5] Evangelicalism, that is, has to do with heart, head, and hands.

Commentators on evangelicalism in America will vary somewhat in describing this theological core. Marsden, for example, adds the real, historical character of God's saving work and the importance of a spiritually transformed life to his list. But though emphases may vary and the list may expand, there is a common theological understanding which allows observers to recognize a

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[2] Billy Graham, quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward, 'The Split-up Evangelicals,' *Newsweek* 99 (April 26, 1982), 89.

[3] Martin Marty, quoted in Woodward, 'Spit-up Evangelicals,' 89.

[4] George Marsden, 'The Evangelical Denomination,' in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids, 1984), ix.

[5] Robert K. Johnston, 'American Evangelicalism: An Extended Family,' in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, eds. Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Knoxville, TN, 1991), 261. Marsden would label this attempted definition one that stresses 'a conceptual unity.' But this is perhaps to skew the category in favor of Reformed evangelicalism. For a Pietist evangelical, any theological unity there might be would include not only great confessions, but great testimonies. As Bruce Shelley writes in his book *Evangelicalism in America*: 'Evangelicals are "orthodox" Christians in the sense that they accept the cardinal doctrines of historic Protestantism, but they are convinced that the true doctrine of Christ must be followed by a true decision for Christ.' Bruce Shelley, *Evangelicalism in America* (Grand Rapids, 1967), 7. For a similar definition to mine, see Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals: Revolution in Orthodoxy* (New York, 1974), 4.

family resemblance among otherwise diverse peoples and groups. Is there a need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as one's Savior and Lord? Is one's attitude toward the Bible that it is one's sole and binding authority? And is one committed to sharing the gospel in word and deed with one's neighbors, both near and far? If the answers to these three questions are 'yes,' then that person belongs to 'the evangelical denomination.'

b. Historically

Alongside such theological descriptions of 'evangelicalism' are others which use historical distinctions. Marsden recognizes that 'evangelicalism' can also name 'a more organic movement': 'Religious groups with some common traditions and experiences, despite wide diversities and only meager institutional interconnections, may constitute a movement in the sense of moving or tending in some common directions.'[6]

For American Protestantism, there have been three periods, each with its own distinctives, in which the word 'evangelical' has proven central.[7] In the 16th century Reformation, 'evangelical' was used to designate those Protestants who sought to emphasize *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*, and the priesthood of all believers. (Can one hear echoes of the contemporary three-fold theological description?) A second use of the term is linked in the English-speaking world to the evangelical revivals and the Great Awakening which began in the 18th century. Here a reemphasis on new life in Christ, on conversion and on acts of love came to the fore. And finally, a third historical expression of the term 'evangelical' is associated with the rise of 20th century fundamentalism. Here the stress was initially a conservative one, a reaction to both modernism and liberalism which were thought to undercut one's core theological commitments to the classical biblical doctrines, or fundamentals, of the faith.

There are wide divergences in these three historical movements. The evangelicalism which followed upon revivalism was

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[6] Marsden, 'The Evangelical Denomination,' ix.

[7] Donald W. Dayton has done the most helpful work at this point. Cf. 'Whither Evangelicalism?,' in *Sanctification and Liberation*, ed. Theodore Runyon (Nashville, 1981), 142–163; 'The Social and Political Conservatism of Modern American Evangelicalism: A Preliminary Search for the Reasons,' *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 22, 1977, 71–80.

more characteristically Arminian, for example, while the evangelicalism that has perhaps best characterized the 20th century evangelical movement is Calvinist. But despite such differences, one can note a common direction over the centuries. Evangelical Christians have sought in each case to return to/recover/maintain the authoritative word of Scripture, a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and a robust sense of mission.

c. Sociologically

'Evangelicalism' can also be understood in a third sense. Not only is the term used to describe a common theology and a common heritage, but it has come to denote a self-conscious community. There is a sociological meaning to the term. Here is surely the reason that *Time* magazine separated out black Protestants. Evangelicals in every denomination know the same choruses (have you sung 'Majesty' by Jack Hayford?), read the same popular religious books (Chuck Colson has had bestseller after bestseller), listen to the same Christian music on CD's (Amy Grant was a household word in my home long before her crossover into mainstream music), respond to the same trends and fads in Christian experience (a current emphasis is on 'concerts of prayer'), hear the same radio celebrities (James Dobson influences millions), buy the same Bible translations or paraphrases (the current favorite is Eugene Peterson's *The Message*), support the same para-church ministries (Young Life, Youth with a Mission, InterVarsity), send their daughters and sons to the same Christian colleges (the Christian College Coalition of over 80 schools is thriving), and recruit pastors from the same evangelical seminaries (schools like Asbury, Trinity, Reformed, Gordon-Conwell and Fuller are some of the largest in the Association). Thus, it is not only evangelicalism's influence on the Republican party and within the religious right that should be noted (thankfully). The social fabric of evangelicalism is broad and encompassing.

2. Orthodoxy and heresy

What then can be said about orthodoxy and heresy within this evangelical 'denomination,' one that evidences both an underlying unity and a far-ranging diversity. There are evangelicals who are uncomfortable being defined sociologically. John Howard Yoder, for example, hardly fits the characterization that

I have provided as he will be the first to say. Depending on an evangelical's identification with a particular historical stream, he/she will emphasize one aspect or another of evangelicalism's core beliefs and will supplement these with other emphases. The current academic debate between Don Dayton and George Marsden or Mark Noll over Presbyterian or Pentecostal paradigms illustrates this difference. Such demur and differentiation are both justified and helpful, but of secondary importance to our task at hand. For it is not first of all from evangelicalism's definition sociologically or historically that issues regarding orthodoxy and heresy can best be understood; it is from evangelicalism as theologically described. I say this knowing full well that any such division is artificial, all three aspects necessarily converging and diverging. (Perhaps this is why Ralph Winter has said that one can no more describe evangelicalism 'purely theologically than one can eat soup with a fork.'[8])

Paul Hiebert provides a helpful clue to sorting through the maze of evangelicalism's theological understandings in a seminal article on evangelical missiology written in 1978. He asks the question, how much must a hypothetical Indian peasant know about the Gospel in order to be converted? If there is no equivalent meaning for the word 'God' in the peasant's language, for example, must another meaning for God be learned before she can become a Christian? Hiebert turns to studies in human cognition for his answer, in particular, to the way our mind forms categories.

Sometimes, our mind puts together things that share common characteristics. This categorization can be referred to as a *bounded set* (cf. the apple as 'a firm fleshy somewhat round fruit of a Rosaceous tree'). Understood thusly, 'evangelicalism' is defined by a list of essential characteristics which allow clear boundaries to be defined and maintained. Objects within this set are uniform in their essential characteristics. (One apple is not more an apple than another.) And once defined as within the boundary, no further distinctions are mandated. (A rotten apple is still an apple.) The goal in such boundary maintenance is to include all who truly fit and to exclude all who do not. Harold Lindsell's *The Battle for the Bible* is a classic example of bounded-set thinking with regard to evangelicalism.[9] In that book he chooses certain characteristics as necessary tests of

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[8] Ralph Winter, quoted in Dayton, 'Whither Evangelicalism?,' 143.
[9] Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids, 1976).

orthodoxy, excluding from evangelicalism those who claim the title by another criterion, but who are not.

Hiebert notes that there is also a second form of categorical thinking, one that seeks to form a *centered set*. Here the relationships are dynamic, not static. One can be moving towards or away from the center. There is still clear division as to who belongs to the set, but there is less stress on the boundaries. Writes Hiebert: 'The set focuses upon the *center* and the boundary emerges when the center and the movement of the objects have been defined. There is no great need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set. The boundary is *so* long as the center is clear.'[10] Such centered-set thinking with regards to evangelicalism can be seen in this definition of evangelicalism which I have previously offered: 'Evangelicals are those who identify with the orthodox faith of the Reformers in their answers to Christianity's two fundamental questions: (1) How is it possible for a sinner to be saved and to be reconciled to his or her Creator and God?. . . (2) By what authority do I believe what I believe and teach what I teach?'[11] Variation exists within evangelicalism concerning these two questions, but at their center are *solus Christus* and *sola scriptura*.

It is my thesis that for the first generation of evangelicals following World War 2, orthodoxy is defined primarily as a bounded set of fundamentals, with modernism and theological liberalism as its foils. We can understand Carl F. H. Henry in this way, as well as those like James Davison Hunter and David F. Wells who continue in his stead. Such theologians have understood their task as reasserting 'the reality of truth in a world of fading dreams' (the subtitle of Wells' book, *God in the Wasteland*).[12] Heresy becomes the capitulation of orthodoxy to the forces of this age.

There were a transitional group of early evangelical theologians, however, who while accepting orthodoxy's bounded set as fundamental, became increasingly uncomfortable with certain of its implications. Edward J. Carnell sought to embody within evangelicalism a more ecumenical posture by arguing against

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[10] Paul G. Hiebert, 'Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,' *Gospel in Context*, 1, 1978, 28. I am indebted to my colleague Ray S. Anderson for recommending this article to me.

[11] Robert K. Johnston, 'Introduction: Unity and Diversity in Evangelical Theology,' in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, ed. Robert K. Johnston (Atlanta, 1985), 2–3.

[12] David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids, 1994).

evangelicalism's regnant 'status by negation' and for a posture of loving embrace within the wider Christian community. Similarly, Bernard Ramm sought within neo-evangelicalism's commitment to contemporary scholarship to relate modern scientific thought and orthodox Christianity. Both Carnell and Ramm continued to function within the parameters they inherited from an evangelicalism rooted in the fundamentalist tradition, but they modulated their bounded-set thinking into a different key.

Building on the work of those like Carnell and Ramm, there has been more recently a second generation of evangelicals who have redefined evangelicalism's orthodoxy chiefly in terms of a centered set. (My theological definitions of evangelicalism offered above provide one such example.) Here, a concern both within and without for issues of apologetics and a commitment to root out heresy and falsehood wherever it is found have largely shifted to the need for robust proclamation of the gospel. For evangelicals like David Allan Hubbard, Richard J. Mouw, Clark H. Pinnock, and John R. W. Stott, as well as for this writer, it is the authority of the gospel through word and through deed that has become our focus.[13] Dialogue with wider Christianity has been encouraged; civility in discourse has been championed. Modern and post-modern culture has been recognized as a source for theology, even while a commitment to biblical authority and an appreciation for the classical sources have been maintained. New doctrinal proposals have occasionally come forward, as theological creativity has again been entertained. Some have labelled this new direction 'progressive evangelicalism.' Fuller Theological Seminary might be viewed as at the center of this redefinition. But progressives can be found on many evangelical faculties and in a wide range of educational institutions.

3. Evangelical theology and bounded-set thinking

A strong commitment to Christian apologetics in the defense of historic orthodoxy might be said to characterize American evangelicalism in the two decades following WWII. Such a posture has also been maintained within the present as one strand of contemporary evangelicalism. Fighting a perceived anti-intellectualism within their ranks and a perceived cultural captivity to modernity in ecumenical theology, early evangelicals

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[13] Cf. Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice* (Atlanta, 1979).

had a strong sense of correctness about their theology. They lived out their vocation as guardians of a received body of truth.

a. Carl F. H. Henry: orthodoxy and truth

Representative of this group of evangelical theologians and one of its leading spokespersons for over four decades has been Carl F. H. Henry. Throughout his career, he has argued for the validity of divine revelation as propositional truth. Beclouding revelation by relating it to anything other than explicitly rational content leads, for Henry, to the loss of the truth of revelation. Modernity has nothing to contribute to the equation, something theological liberalism has ignored. Revelation as truth needs to be limited to cognition so as to insure absolute objectivity. Epistemological truth concerning the divine is possible, moreover, for the human mind (logos) is in a univocal (not analogical) relation with the divine mind (Logos), thus making mental apprehension of the Word of God possible. Absolute truth about religious reality is not an ugly dogmatism, reasons Henry, but our escape from despair. He writes, 'The final choice for modern man is between Christianity and nihilism, between the Logos of God and the ultimate meaninglessness of life and the world.'[14] Thinks Henry, 'Yo-yo theology—that is, perpetually restructured belief—is less (his) forte than Yahweh theology, the "faith once-for-all delivered." '[15]

Henry's commitment to objective, propositional revelation has made him a champion for biblical inerrancy. David Hubbard recalls being a student in one of Henry's classes in the late 1940's:

> Carl Henry's warning still rings in our ears: 'If one leaves the refuge of biblical inerrancy, there is no logical stopping place short of nihilism.' Most of us were afraid even to look over the edge of that toboggan run, let alone to embark on it.[16]

This commitment to biblical, propositional revelation has also made Henry a consistent opponent of theological liberalism.

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[14] Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, volume 1 (Waco, TX, 1976), 41.

[15] Carl F. H. Henry, 'American Evangelicals in a Turning Time,' *The Christian Century*, 97, 1980, 1059.

[16] David Allan Hubbard, 'Destined to Boldness: A Biography of an Evangelical Institution, Lecture Two: An Academic Adventure,' manuscript of the Ezra Squier Tipple Lectures, Drew University (October 23, 1979), 8.

Writing in 1950 of fifty years of Protestant theology, Henry concluded:

> Liberalism lost its way when it lost the Bible, and no theology will find its way which speaks confidently of a Word of God which needs, by some modern genius, to be emancipated from the Scriptures .... The great reproach against evangelicals, whether by liberals or neo-supernaturalists, is that we really trust the Bible as God's Word written, and because of this we are modern heretics![17]

A champion for biblical truth, a consistent opponent of theological liberalism of whatever stripe, Henry has considered *theological* intolerance to be at times a virtue, even while he has consistently sought dialogue on a personal level with the wider Christian world.[18] What better accolade than to be thought a modern heretic.

b. James Davison Hunter: orthodoxy and modernity, part 1

This understanding of evangelical orthodoxy as a cognitive minority within modern society who can be described by their commitments to propositional truth and to theological over-againstness has been adopted by the sociologist James Davison Hunter. In his books *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (1983) and *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (1987), Hunter assumes that 'evangelical' orthodoxy is to be (should be?) equated with the exclusive beliefs of conservative Protestantism, or fundamentalism. Here is his benchmark. Wondering how such individuals could not be thought intolerably divisive by the larger modern society in which they live and work, Hunter hypothesizes that some accommodation to the constraints of modernity has surely taken place. Thus, the basis for his research. Hunter finds, not

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[17] Carl F. H. Henry, *Fifty Years of Protestant Theology* (Boston, 1950), 95,97–98.

[18] George Marsden recounts in his history of Fuller Seminary that when Harold Lindsell suggested to Billy Graham that Carl Henry be appointed the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, Graham expressed concern that Henry might be too 'fundamentalistic ' (I take this to mean intolerant, or one-sided.) Graham wanted to plant the evangelical flag in the middle of the road, combining 'the best in liberalism and the best in fundamentalism without compromising theologically ' Graham's agenda included seeing the good as well as the bad in the W.C.C. and the N.C.C. It also was open to the rapprochement that Bernard Ramm was suggesting regarding science and the Scriptures. [Billy Graham, quoted in George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, 1987), 158.]

surprisingly, that in contemporary evangelicalism a widening of the cognitive boundaries of theological orthodoxy has indeed transpired. After surveying the thought of the Reformers on a variety of theological topics in order to establish the norm, Hunter presents statistics about the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of contemporary evangelical collegians and seminarians, showing these young evangelicals to be quietly capitulating to the forces of modernity.

Hunter concludes that there is a modification in evangelical theology, not at its center but its boundaries. There has been accommodation. There is a broadening of the meaning of some of evangelicalism's fundamental doctrines—the inerrancy/infallibility of Scripture, the atonement, Christian mission. These doctrines 'mean *more* than they did even a generation or two ago,' writes Hunter. There is less sharpness, even a measure of opaqueness in evangelicalism's theology. 'Insofar as this is true, theological orthodoxy is reinterpreted; the tradition is redefined. Orthodoxy, then, comes to mean something novel.'[19]

For Hunter the world of the coming generation of evangelicals may bear little resemblance to the closed world of thought typical of previous generations. The issue is that of evangelicalism's theological boundaries, 'the theological criteria determining the range and limits of acceptability.' Most religious orthodoxies are distinguished by the narrowness with which these lines are drawn. Conservative Protestantism (evangelicalism) is no exception, opines Hunter. 'The duty of the faithful is to ensure that the boundaries remain intact—pure and undefiled.'[20] Such boundaries should be timeless, but in evangelicalism they are proving not to be. Hunter thus implicitly criticizes contemporary evangelicalism for straying from the fold. While he claims to be simply the descriptive sociologist, his working definition of evangelicalism defines the answer he 'discovers,' implicitly offering a normative and negative judgment in the process.

Like Henry, Hunter sees too many evangelicals accommodating the truth of the gospel to the culture around them. Although the center has yet to shift, he wonders if that is not the inevitable next step. Can heresy be far behind? If evangelicalism is definitionally the theological bounded set known to fundamentalism, then evangelicalism is indeed changing. Hunter is correct. But did we need a sociologist to tell us? And is bounded-set evangelicalism

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[19] James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago, 1987), 163.

[20] Hunter, *Evangelicalism*, 19, 159.

the only sure place on which to stand? One hears the refrain of the familiar 'domino theory' in Hunter's indirect questioning.

c. David F. Wells: orthodoxy and modernity, part 2

Just as Hunter, the sociologist, decries the softening of evangelicalism in the face of modernity, so David F. Wells brings charges from his perspective as an historical theologian. A book jacket testimonial from R. Albert Mohler, Jr., the conservative president of Southern Seminary, summarizes well Wells' latest two volumes:

> David Wells has done it again. *No Place for Truth* was the bomb that exploded on the playground of the evangelicals. *God in the Wasteland* is the battlefield manual for evangelical strategy in the midst of modernity's debris .... Wells's book demonstrates to his fellow evangelicals that a theologian can look squarely at modernity without capitulation or evasion .... He is a prophetic voice in an unprophetic age.[21]

Wells believes that evangelical theology, like most of evangelical practice, has succumbed to modernity. It too often 'displays an odd combination of tepid theological traditionalism with aggressive embrace of certain forms of popular culture.'[22] What should allow evangelicals to maintain their integrity against the inroads of modernity—the serious appropriation of Scripture, the intelligent study of the tradition , and a vigorous blending of other intellectual sources—has been marginalized by the TV and entertainment culture we live in. Here is the heart of the contemporary evangelical tragedy.

Instead of tracing the trajectory of divine revelation from the biblical Word to the contemporary world, 'from what is fixed, unchanging, and infallible to what is shifting, changing and relative,' Wells believes that evangelical theological bridge building has allowed traffic to go in the reverse direction.[23] Evangelicals have 'substituted the relative for the absolute, the Many for the One, diversity for unity, the human for the divine.'[24] Seen

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[21] R. Albert Mohler, Jr., endorsement on jacket of *God in the Wasteland*, by David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, 1994).

[22] Noll, Plantinga, and Wells, 'Evangelical Theology Today,' 501.

[23] Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells, 'Introduction: Modern Evangelicalism,' in *Christian Faith & Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, eds. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, 1988), 15.

[24] David F Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, 1993), 7–8.

in this light, evangelicals and liberals share more in common than they might think: for both, it is the twentieth century that needs to be demythologized, not the Bible as sometimes supposed.

In its review of *No Place for Truth*, *Christianity Today* placed an illustration alongside Wells' book showing a caricature of Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer sitting with tin cups, begging dejectedly on the steps of the church. Their commitment to a certain absolute and objective meaning in theology, to 'the cognitive substance of faith,' has slipped from favor, though certainly not from the favor of Wells. With Henry and Schaeffer, Wells believes that the bottom line for our modern world is that there is no truth and thus no heresy; the bottom line for Christian consciousness should be the opposite:

> Modern experience does not provide access to God; God alone provides this access. It originates in his grace, is objectively grounded in Jesus Christ, and is open now to moderns not through their experience of themselves but through their acceptance of his revealed truth.[25]

4. Transitional evangelical theologians

a. Edward John Carnell: orthodoxy and love

Henry, Hunter, and Wells all argue for an evangelicalism which is grounded in an objective set of theological beliefs which need constant defending against the onslaughts of modernity and its expected civility. They fear heresy, both within and without. But other evangelicals, while holding to revelation as a bounded set of truths, sought early in the post-war period to move evangelicalism beyond its divisiveness and belligerence on the one hand, and its anti-modernism on the other. As such, Edward John Carnell and Bernard Ramm presaged the advent of a new theological style for evangelical orthodoxy, one that would focus on the center and no longer on the boundaries.

In 1959 Edward John Carnell published *The Case for Orthodox Theology*. The book was one of a series of three commissioned by the publisher, the others being *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective*, by L. Harold DeWolf and *The Case for a New Reformation Theology*, by William Hordern. Carnell began his last chapter with these words:

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[25] Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 299.

> Orthodoxy does not have all the answers; nor does it always ask the right questions. And when it gives the right answers to the right questions, it often corrupts its claims with bad manners.
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> But beneath these outer garments is the warm flesh of Christian truth: the truth that love is the law of life; that all men are sinners; that Christ bore the penalty of sin; that repentant sinners are clothed with the righteousness of Christ; that Christ is confronted in and through the written Word; and that the written Word is consistent with itself and consistent with the things signified.
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> We have defined orthodoxy as "that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible."[26]

Here was an orthodoxy oriented toward Christian truth; one rooted in Scripture and delimited along traditional lines. But Carnell's orthodoxy was also an orthodoxy in a new key.

Perhaps the most helpful window for understanding the contours of Carnell's modulated orthodoxy is his inaugural address as President of Fuller Theological Seminary which was delivered May 17, 1955, but which evoked such immediate controversy among his more traditional colleagues on the faculty, Carl Henry and Harold Lindsell being two, that it was suppressed and not published until well after Carnell's death. The issue at stake was not doctrine per se, but Carnell's attitude of openness and love. Carnell's address was entitled 'The Glory of a Theological Seminary.' It found the first evidence of a seminary's glory to consist 'in a faithful preservation and propagation of the confessional lines that inhere in the institution itself. A vague spiritual pledge to honor the Gospel is not enough.'[27] Carnell remained deeply committed to Calvinistic orthodoxy throughout his life and his commitment to biblical inerrancy was sufficiently strong despite some helpful nuancing in *The Case for Orthodox Christianity* for Harold Lindsell to count him a supporter. In fact, in *The Battle for the Bible* Lindsell lists Carnell in his dedication as one of four teaching colleagues, 'all of whom stood or stand steadfastly for biblical inerrancy.'[28] In his address, Carnell said he remained committed to 'the truth of the system' and saw the need to 'passionately interpret this truth to each new generation.'

Carnell's second point in his address called for academic openness and honesty by students and faculty alike: 'that in

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[26] Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia, 1959), 139.

[27] Edward John Carnell, 'The Glory of a Theological Seminary,' pamphlet (Pasadena, CA, nd), np.

[28] Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible*, dedication of book.

preserving and propagating its theological distinctives, the seminary make a conscientious effort to acquaint its students with all the relevant evidences—damaging as well as supporting—in order that the students may be given a reasonable opportunity to exercise their God-given right freely to decide for or against claims to truth.' Carnell would repeatedly return to this point in his later writings, criticizing fundamentalism, for example, for its intellectual stagnation. Lastly, and most controversially, Carnell saw the need for a theological seminary to 'inculcate in its students an attitude of tolerance and forgiveness toward individuals whose doctrinal convictions are at variance with those that inhere in the institution itself.' Instead of persecuting those who are heterodox in their theology, Carnell admonished his listeners 'to love them with a measure of the love wherewith Christ first loved us ' Vengeance and intolerance must yield to patience and understanding. Carnell ended his address by quoting Luke 6:31–38:

> And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them . . . . love your enemies, and do good, . . . Judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; . . . for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.

Carnell rejected fundamentalism's 'status by negation' that all too often avoided precise theological inquiry.[29] He understood the scandal of Christendom to be 'the manner in which believers seek status in doctrine and form, rather than love.'[30] Such recognitions cost him aspects of his leadership as a seminary president and contributed to his ill health and shortened life. Committed every bit as much as his colleagues to both propositional theology and to conservative apologetics, Carnell nonetheless recognized the limits of knowledge and the need for love. George Marsden sarcastically comments, 'When Christian leaders start talking about love or the limits of our knowledge, (the charge of) heresy cannot be far behind.'[31] Carnell was too much a product of his upbringing always to act consistently with his own intentions. He could call fundamentalism cultic and see dispensationalism as a peril. Not all have found his criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr

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[29] Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 117,120.
[30] Edward John Carnell, *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life* (Grand Rapids, 1960), 121.
[31] Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 148.

theologically compelling.[32] Yet with his commitment to intellectual openness at all costs, and with his commitment to love as the chief sign of the Kingdom, Carnell signalled a new direction for evangelical orthodoxy.

b. Bernard Ramm: orthodoxy and scientific thought

Bernard Ramm begins his book *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (1983) by recounting a personal story:

> I had just finished a lecture on my version of American evangelical theology. When I was asked by a shrewd listener to define evangelical theology more precisely, I experienced inward panic .... I saw my theology as a series of doctrines picked up here and there, like a rag-bag collection. To stutter out a reply to that question was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do on a public platform.[33]

Ramm saw himself as a product of the orthodox-liberal debate that had gone on for a century and which had caused a warping of evangelical theology. Controversial doctrines had consumed too much of his energy while others had been neglected. He reflected, 'I did not have a theology whose methodology was scientifically ascertained, nor doctrines scientifically interrelated nor properly defended.'[34]

Ramm was perhaps too hard on himself. The question of how one reconciles ancient ('scriptural') and modern ('scientific') understandings of truth was one he spent most of his career considering. Beginning with a basic volume in biblical hermeneutics, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (1950), and continuing with his ground-breaking work, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (1954), Bernard Ramm had been by then at the forefront of evangelical theology in raising this question for over three decades. Now as a mature theologian, Ramm was continuing the discussion, focusing this time on theological methodology. Ramm believed that the Enlightenment had been a shattering experience for orthodox theology from which it had never fully recovered. He thus looked for help in understanding the relationship of modern thought to orthodox Christianity and found it in the writings of Karl Barth. Ramm found in Barth's theology a

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[32] For a discussion of these and other examples, see Edward John Carnell, *The Case for Biblical Christianity*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, 1969).

[33] Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism; The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, 1983), 1.

[34] Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 1–2.

restatement of Reformed theology written in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, a reformulation that was both contemporary and orthodox. According to Ramm, Barth recognized that the theologian needed to 'grant all which is valid in modern learning but without the self-defeating strategy of capitulating to it with regard to theology.'[35] His theological methodology could thus provide evangelicals a new paradigm, argued Ramm, if only in a heuristic sense.

Traditional theological approaches to the questions raised by modern thinkers had proven inadequate for Ramm, whether they be liberal or conservative. Neither novelty nor premature foreclosure could be the theologian's product. Liberalism too often ended up distorting the truth of Christianity by uncritically accepting the ideas of the Enlightenment. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, obscured the truth of science, inconsistently denying the fact that even it was an heir of Enlightenment thinking. A new approach to theology was needed, one that would permit a contemporary orthodoxy to flourish. Ramm recognized that not all evangelicals would see modern learning as ushering in a new cultural epoch. Evolution, modern geology, scientific anthropology and biblical criticism would still be subjected to castigation by them. But others who subscribed to orthodox theology would recognize that there was in the modern world a radically new set of issues, issues that would need new theological models and patterns. If Barth's paradigm were not ultimately to prove adequate, it could at least be instrumental in leading evangelicals to the discovery of a more adequate theological schema.

As with Carnell, Ramm remained committed to the truth of Reformed orthodoxy throughout his career. In his book, *The Evangelical Heritage*, for example, Ramm traced evangelicalism's family tree through the Western Augustinian tradition and the Reformation to Protestant Orthodoxy. This line then flowed to the Calvinism of Old Princeton, into fundamentalism and then into modern evangelicalism.[36] We need not concern ourselves in this context with the adequacy or accuracy of Ramm's historical analysis. Surely it can be argued that there were competing and/or complementing Arminian, Wesleyan, Pietistic, and Anabaptist roots that helped shape evangelical orthodoxy. What is to the point is that Ramm believed the Word of God, and thus truth, to come prior to human experience. Yet, while committed to historic

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[35] Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 15.

[36] Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco,TX, 1973).

orthodoxy, Ramm also realized that we could not dogmatize facts into or out of existence. They are also 'there.' Thus, along side theological presupposition lay empirical study. Ramm summarized his perspective thusly:

> To put it another way, modern people are both scientists and sinners. Because they are scientists, the theologian must listen to them with respect; because they are sinners, they must listen to the theologian with equal respect.[37]

5. Evangelical theology and centered-set thinking

When Edward John Carnell stepped down as President of Fuller Theological Seminary in 1959, the school was faced with a decision as to whether it would move forward along the trajectory he was establishing—a commitment to critical rigor, scholarly openness, and generosity in Christianity dialogue—or whether it would pull back to a more creedal and belligerent orthodoxy. While on the surface, the debate centered on whether 'inerrancy' or 'infallibility' was the best descriptor of the Bible's teaching of its own authority, the struggle was at a deeper level over theological-apologetic methodology, over how orthodoxy was to be defined.[38] Was inerrancy an evangelical boundary-marker in order to insure an adequate commitment to an authoritative Scripture? Or was it enough to be committed to believe what Scripture said and taught? Were evangelicals to build their doctrine of Scripture inductively from the teaching and phenomenon of Scripture itself, or were they to start with a priori assumptions given their understanding of the nature of God? And what place did the principle of tolerance have for orthodox evangelicals with regard to those who held to the authority of Scripture but used new interpretive methodologies and/or entertained new understandings of what Scripture said or meant?

The debate over inerrancy was to consume the attention of Fuller Seminary for more than a decade. It still is a major source of contention within evangelicalism as 'heresy' discussions concerning the interpretation of Scripture by Paul Jewett (Fuller),

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[37] Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 15.

[38] Hubbard, 'Destined to Boldness, Lecture One: An Ecumenical Experiment, manuscript, 13.

Ramsey Michaels (Gordon-Conwell), and Robert Gundry (Westmont) indicate.[39] Key to the eventual resolution of this debate at Fuller, however, was the appointment of David Allan Hubbard as president after a protracted and sometimes stormy interim. Hubbard would latter reflect:

> If my appointment meant anything, it meant that the directions charted by Carnell would continue. He had been a solid influence in my life, and the faculty members who most supported the directions in which he sought to lead the seminary were among my dearest and most cherished friends and mentors. Though I had and have tremendous affection and respect for both Harold Ockenga and Carl Henry, their way of articulating and defending the orthodox faith was not mine.[40]

Under Hubbard's leadership, Fuller Theological Seminary would become the champion of a progressive evangelicalism, of an orthodoxy which would be characterized by centered-set theology.

a. David Allan Hubbard: proclaiming the gospel

David Allan Hubbard was (and is) a trained Old Testament scholar. But in his role as a seminary president, he found himself writing and speaking as often about evangelical theology. Two early addresses are characteristic of how he sought to reorient evangelical theology. George Marsden recounts in his history of Fuller that Hubbard, as part of an early campaign for his presidency by some at Fuller, was invited to address the alumni association. He presented a vision of theological education that would balance scholarship with love, practicality and ministry to the whole person. Moreover, he believed that the theological seminary could 'bring into life the true meaning of the word university where the whole process of learning sings one song, where truth is seen as a whole not as a series of fragments.'[41]

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[39] Cf. the comment by Norman Geisler, professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary at the time of his attempt to expel Robert Gundry from membership in the Evangelical Theological Society: 'Any hermeneutical or theological method the logically necessary consequences of which are contrary to or undermine confidence in the complete truthfulness of all of Scripture is unorthodox ' (quoted in Leslie Keylock, 'Evangelical Scholars Remove Gundry for His Views on Matthew,' *Christianity Today* 31 (February 3, 1984), 37.

[40] Hubbard, 'Destined to Boldness, Lecture Two,' 14.

[41] David Allan Hubbard, 'The Question of Wholeness in Theological Education,' address delivered at the annual alumni association luncheon in June 1962 (mimeograph), quoted in Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 232.

'Balanced judgment,' 'an open mind,' 'loving kindness'—these would become part of Hubbard's substance and style throughout his presidency.[42]

The second address was a sermon entitled 'Are We Evangelicals?' which was delivered initially in 1963. Hubbard would harken back to this text as he positioned himself and Fuller Seminary against the charges of defection from evangelicalism which Harold Lindsell leveled in the 1970's. He would also use its basic contours as he wrote the introduction to his book, *What We Evangelicals Believe* (first edition, 1979; second edition, 1991), a commentary on Fuller's Statement of Faith for lay readers.[43] In each case, Hubbard chose not to concentrate on Scripture per se, thus avoiding the boundary debates over the Bible which had plagued (and continue to plague) evangelicalism. To be sure, Scripture was part of God's revelation to us, and Hubbard made this clear. But Hubbard chose to deal more implicitly with Scripture as the authoritative source book for the Gospel. His focus was on the central truths of the gospel as understood in the Reformation.

In *What We Evangelicals Believe*, Hubbard comments that 'no one item should control the evangelical agenda. And certainly no doctrine not central to the gospel should become an ultimate bone of contention among us.' Thus, Hubbard described evangelicalism as having at its root 'a commitment to the good news that God has made salvation possible through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ and that salvation will be the experience of those who truly trust God for it.'[44] Evangelicals can dig in to defend their doctrines, but they should be sure, cautions

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[42] Hubbard recounts a painful memory concerning his conversations between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals in the early eighties. For the close of one of the discussions, he was asked to summarize the differences in theology between evangelical and mainstream Protestants. He writes, 'With more intensity than I was aware of, I spelled out the doctrines of the faith from a view of biblical authority through an approach to hermeneutics and belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, to the reality of a second coming, and the ultimate separation in judgment of unbelievers from believers. I never felt more like a champion of orthodoxy than in those few moments ' But when he sat down, he said that Sister Joan Chatfield, a Maryknoll, 'pointed out the hostility of my body language, the intensity of my voice quality, the pugnacious way in which I was spelling out our orthodox distinctives .... What Carnell had tried to teach all of us in his inaugural address I had yet to grasp. There are many kinds of lessons to be learned in the ecumenical experiment ' Hubbard, 'Destined to Boldness, Lecture One,' 20–21.

[43] David Allan Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe* (Pasadena, 1991).

[44] Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe*, 8–9.

Hubbard, that the issues are central. He then listed these central doctrines—Trinity, revelation, creation, fall, incarnation, cross, resurrection, Holy Spirit, the church and its mission, consummation. In this listing, Scripture becomes a subset of revelation, grouped alongside creation and history as part of a series. It is the great story of biblical redemption that is for Hubbard evangelicalism's hallmark, not a particular understanding of Scripture's inspiration. Here is historic orthodoxy defined in terms of its center, not its boundaries.

b. Four implications of centered-set thinking

Evangelical theology's shift to defining orthodoxy in terms of a centered set has reinforced and solidified changes that transitional theologians Carnell and Ramm struggled to affirm: (1) an openness to the wider church through dialogue and civility; (2) an openness to the wider culture as a source for theological reflection and renewal; (3) a commitment to doing theology in community; and (4) an openness to theological creativity within a continuing commitment to Scripture's authority.

1.) Dialogue and civility

Evangelicalism's increasingly ecumenical spirit has manifest itself both in a kinder and gentler demeanor—a Christian civility—and in a growing willingness for dialogue with other Christians. Richard J. Mouw, has as the titles of two recent books, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (1992) and *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (1994). What both volumes have in common is a largesse of spirit.[45] The first recognizes how difficult it is to hold Christian convictions and yet treat those who oppose you with decency and civility. Mouw asks, 'Can we be faithful and polite too?'[46] Civility is not enough; it must be a civility born of passionate conviction for the truth. In the latter book, Mouw reminds Christian intellectuals that popular piety can be a rich

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[45] This generosity of spirit is so evident that Mark Noll, in reviewing *Consulting the Faithful*, begins by saying: 'I believe I like my friend Richard Mouw's new book, *Consulting the Faithful*, more than he will like my new book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.' The titles of the two volumes speak volumes in this regards. (Mark Noll, 'Learning from the Laity,' *Perspectives* 10 (January, 1995), 22.

[46] Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World* (Downers Grove, IL, 1992), 9.

resource of spiritual yearning and practical wisdom. Despite the fact that popular religion can be trivial and self-centered, even tacky, Mouw proposes 'a hermeneutics of charity.' 'We must discover the eloquence of 'little people' that commands our respect and graces our life.[47]

Mouw spoke in his installation address as President of Fuller Theological Seminary (November 8, 1993) of the need for 'an empathetic orthodoxy.' He emphasized the 'importance of being emissaries of God's gentle guidance' with these words:

> It is my deep hope that the evangelical movement can consciously move into a new dispensation of Christian gentleness, and I sincerely pray that Fuller Seminary can have a role in making that happen. I know that there are occasions when it is important and necessary to speak uncompromising words of judgment and to issue stern calls to repentance. But the world has seen enough of the harsher side of evangelicalism for a season.

As evangelicals worked with Christians from a wide variety of traditions and backgrounds, he hoped they could thus contribute to the renewal of the whole church.[48]

Two jointly authored books by evangelical and liberal Protestant theologians illustrate as well the increasing importance of Christian dialogue for evangelicals. In *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, John Stott and David Edwards propose to determine what is essential to be an evangelical in particular and not a Christian in general. They conclude that their basic disagreement, as evangelical and liberal, centers on those two subjects of traditional debate—authority and salvation. Their theological disagreements are never trivialized; theology and theological error matter. But the tone of humility and mutual respect and the attempt to appreciate and understand one another's position and the reasons for it show that progress in bridge building is being achieved, at least occasionally.[49]

The second volume is entitled *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* and was written by Clark Pinnock and Delwin Brown. Pinnock, the evangelical, suggests that conversation has been enhanced by the recognition that all theologians

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[47] Richard J. Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, 1994), 15,83.

[48] Richard J. Mouw, 'Educating for the Kingdom,' pamphlet (Pasadena, 1993), np; cf. Richard J. Mouw, 'Humility, Hope and the Divine Slowness,' in *How My Mind Has Changed*, eds. James M. Wall and David Heim (Grand Rapids, 1991), 21– 31.

[49] David L. Edwards, with a response from John R.W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL, 1988).

wrestle with two horizons that define their work: 'They strive to correlate the Christian message with human existence.' Whereas liberals are relatively more interested in the pole of human existence, evangelicals are preoccupied with the message pole. But in reality, both are interested in the correlation and integration of both poles—in fidelity to the gospel and in creativity given life's challenges. Thus, Pinnock and Brown go about their task with 'a spirit of openness to change in both of us and a willingness to listen sympathetically to one another.'[50] Here again, is a dialogical posture quite foreign to bounded-set evangelicalism.

2.) Learning from one's culture

In his recent review of Stanley Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God*, Donald Bloesch warns that in addition to Scripture and church tradition, Grenz includes culture as a source for theology: for Grenz, 'the gospel must not only be proclaimed but also contextualized—placed in a new and often alien context.' The danger for Bloesch is that the gospel will be bent to meet the expectation of the culture rather than challenge the culture's self-understanding.[51] Bloesch wants to limit the evangelical's use of the thought forms of contemporary culture to that of providing the means by which the biblical message is conveyed. But increasingly, evangelicals are rejecting such one way traffic. Evangelical missiologists have led the way in helping many evangelical theologians recognize their cultural rootedness. (I have learned much, for example, from my colleagues Charles Kraft and Charles Van Engen.) Harvey Conn is representative here. In *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (1984), he argues that 'multiperspectivalism' must be for evangelicals 'a style of life, a hermeneutic, a way of thinking.' We need to learn from non-first-world Christians, not only about piety but about theology.

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[50] Clark H. Pinnock and Delwin Brown, *Theological Crossfire: An Evangelical/Liberal Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 11.

[51] Donald G. Bloesch, 'A Fellowship of Love,' *Christianity Today* 42 (February 6, 1995), 65; cf., Clark Pinnock, 'How I Use the Bible in Doing Theology,' in *The Use of the Bible in Theology*, ed. Johnston, 29: 'I see the current tendency to relate theology to struggles of the present day, while commendable if it were to represent a desire to apply the Scriptures, to be a recipe for Scripture-twisting on a grand scale. The desire to be relevant and up-to-date has caused numerous theologians to secularize the gospel and suit it to the wishes of modern hearers (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3–4).'

Only in this way can orthodox theology once again be 'more of a dynamic process than one virtually completed in the West.'[52]

In *Evangelicals at an Impasse*, which I wrote in 1979, I argued that evangelical theology needs to listen to the world, not just to the Bible and to tradition. While God has spoken authoritatively through Scripture, God can and does speak also through human culture and natural event. Evangelical theology is impoverished and creativity cut short if cultural insight is short-shrifted or denied. There are occasions when an evangelical theology will need to begin with culture and not with Scripture—with general revelation and not with special revelation. One should not confuse epistemological starting point with one's ultimate theological authority, however. Orthodoxy need not be compromised as theological creativity is sought. I conclude:

> A cultural starting point might well demand a 'hermeneutical suspicion' (i.e., a distrust of one's previous reading of Scripture, given the possibility that such a reading conceals some of the radical implications of the Biblical message for our day), but it may also assist in the renewed hermeneutical task, allowing the Biblical witness to be freshly experienced, freshly understood, and freshly applied.[53]

Such creative dialogue between theology's resources is more an art than a science. There is no rule that can be laid down to insure the maintenance of orthodoxy's center. But anything less than the successful interaction of Scripture, tradition and world is inadequate.

3.) Conversing in community

It is true that the formulation of all 'orthodox' beliefs remains fallible and thus may need revision, that all theological understanding remains partial and incomplete, and that even communities can get 'it' wrong. It is also tragically the case that communities can coerce individual members. But it is nonetheless true that one is more likely to get the truth right in community, for here are present other Christians illumined by the same Word and Spirit. To recognize the value of a theological community is important for all evangelicals where individualistic judgments are too often the rule rather than the exception. But it

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[52] Harvey Conn, Eternal Word and Changing Worlds (Grand Rapids, 1984), 337–338.

[53] Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse*, 154.

is particularly important for centered-set evangelicals where boundaries are purposely less defined. Such evangelicals need to develop networks of discourse, what David Hubbard has called 'strategies of linkage,' whereby Christians can carry on mature theological conversations, affirming their central commitments to the evangelical faith even while working on issues in dispute.[54] Such communities of discourse can keep evangelical theology vibrant and centered.

But although a community can best define and maintain what is to be thought as orthodox for that group, it is also the case that not all truth claims seem as essential as others to a particular community's theological center. And here, surely, is *the problem* for evangelicals with a bounded-set approach. If orthodoxy deals with the whole authoritative formulation of Christian doctrine, what of secondary matters? And how are they to be defined? Should some doctrines have differing obligatory force? Or is the fringe equally important? And what is the fringe as opposed to adiaphoral issues? At any point in time, some truth in the church would seem to be irrreformable—to deny it would be to deny the Word of God. But other truths seem derivitive. Yet, the line is never clearly drawn.

One need only consider the debate over 'inerrancy' within evangelicalism to recognize the problem. Some bounded-set evangelicals would seek to place a belief in biblical inerrancy—a particular formulation of the doctrine of inspiration—on par with a commitment to biblical authority. By conflating authority, inspiration, and inerrancy in this way, they make 'inerrancy' irreformable, a benchmark of orthodoxy. But other evangelicals would understand such an approach to confuse evangelical orthodoxy's central commitment to *sola scriptura* with a secondary commitment to one theory of the result of inspiration. Even spokespeople for biblical inerrancy such as Carl Henry and Bernard Ramm have recognized that this is 'to confuse one of several possible tests of evangelical *consistency* with the test of evangelical authenticity.'[55]

Some Christian beliefs *are* essential. I have suggested that for American evangelicals over the last fifty years, these have

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[54] David Hubbard, 'The Future of Evangelicalism,' given at a colloquium at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, Denver, Colorado, 1977 (manuscript of taped remarks).

[55] Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse*, 5. In more recent writing, Henry seems to conflate the importance of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and that of biblical authority. Cf. Carl F. H. Henry, 'The Vagrancy of the American Spirit,' *Faculty Dialogue* 22 (Fall 1994), 7.

consistently centered on (1) a personal faith in Jesus Christ, (2) a belief in the Bible as final authority, and (3) a vital commitment to Christian mission. Such an understanding of evangelicalism's theological center, like all theological formulations, is surely debatable. But evangelicals need to recognize that theology is a task of the church in community, not competition. Too much evangelical theology continues to be done in isolation.

4.) Theological creativity

In an article entitled 'Evangelicals and Theological Creativity' (1979), Geoffrey Bromiley discussed what seemed to be evangelical theology's inherent disadvantage when it comes to the field of originality. Evangelicals typically try to stop those who wander off in creative speculation. Creative theology is too often just another form of subjective impressionism, he thinks. However, such nay saying does not mean for Bromiley that there is no place for creative, scientific work in evangelical theology: '. . . the field is open,' he says,'for sober creative activity, first of all in research, but then also in interpretation and application ' By application, Bromiley means not so much an analysis of the data itself, but the interpretation of that data for a new generation. The theologian needs to be 'both loyal in content and contemporary in expression.'[56] Here was expressed the limits of theological creativity within a bounded-set orthodoxy. In method and tone it was far different than what *Evangelicals at an Impasse* proposed that same year.

What Bromiley described still characterizes much of evangelicalism, as Donald Bloesch's review of Grenz and my discussion of David Wells perhaps indicate. But other evangelicals, freed from concentrating on the boundary and empowered from out of orthodoxy's center, have understood theology's creative possibilities in broader terms. This has resulted in a development and/or change in their theological understanding on such topics as the ordination of women, the church's response to homosexuals, divorce, and the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the Christian. I documented four such areas of creative ferment in evangelical orthodoxy in *Evangelicals at an Impasse*.[57]

A brief look at the current theological growing edges of John Stott and Clark Pinnock can be helpful for our understanding of

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[56] Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'Evangelicals and Theological Creativity,' *Themelios* 5 (September, 1979), 4–8.

[57] Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse*.

the extent to which theological creativity is being expressed within evangelicalism today. For John Stott the movement toward defining evangelical orthodoxy from out of its center, rather than in terms of its boundaries, has allowed him to posit 'conditional immortality,' the wicked being ultimately annihilated rather than being eternally tormented. Stott says he takes this position for Scripture points in its direction, though he also confesses he has gone to Scripture because he finds the concept of everlasting suffering to be intolerable.[58] In the same context, Stott also cherishes the hope that most people will be saved. He finds it appalling to visualize millions perishing. Stott believes he has found scriptural warrant for this theological notion, though here too, he is initially motivated by his own emotional sensitivities. Scripture remains the ultimate theological point of authorization for Stott, as for all evangelicals: 'As a committed Evangelical, my question must be—and is—not what does my heart tell me, but what does God's word say?'[59] But the theological process is much more fluid than previous, personal experience finding its dialogical place at the theological table.

For Clark H. Pinnock, the proposed changes in evangelicalism's theological system have been even more radical, having to do not with a single doctrine or practice but with one's whole theology. Robert Brow, in an article in *Christianity Today* (1990) entitled 'Evangelical Megashift,' tried to document these changes by talking about a 'new-model' evangelicalism which shared with the old-model a commitment to Jesus as Savior and the Bible as authoritative (Here is Pinnock's centered-set orthodoxy), but which diverged in emphasizing human freedom and the love of God. He asks concerning this perceived new direction, should we embrace it as a recovery of biblical faith, repudiate it as cultural capitulation, or recognize it as the faith contextualized for modern minds? Brow's article was followed by brief responses by, among others, David Wells (This 'is not the emergence of a new model but rather the dismembering of the old by the forces of modernity') and Clark Pinnock (This ' "new" thinking is not all that new; it is "the Arminian option.' ")[60]

But Pinnock's 'Arminian option' is proving quite new within current evangelicalism. Following upon Brow's article, Pinnock and Brow teamed to write *Unbounded Love: A Good News*

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[58] Edwards, with Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 287–329.
[59] Edwards, with Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 315.
[60] Robert Brow, 'Evangelical Megashift,' *Christianity Today* 37 (February 19, 1990), 12–14.

Theology for the 21st Century. They argue for what they term 'creative love theism.' God's mercy will not exclude any persons arbitrarily from saving help. Moreover, understanding Jesus' use of the category 'father' allows them to find God's openness and God's desire to restore relationships with us (God cannot be thought of primarily as a judge.). Finally, understanding God as a mutual and interrelating Trinity allows them to move beyond notions of God as all-determining. Pinnock's and Brow's goal is to help those who have had their minds distorted by 'darker images' recover the good news of the gospel.[61]

Pinnock's book *A Wideness in God's Mercy* (1992) provides a fuller treatment of one aspect of this 'creative love theism,' a reformulated evangelical theology of religions. It seeks to challenge the older pessimism concerning people of other religions while adhering to the central doctrines of orthodox theology, in particular the finality of Jesus Christ. The contemporary challenge of religious pluralism, together with the relativistic mindset of late modernity, is forcing us to reconsider how the dialectical truth claims of Scripture can best be reconciled, namely 'God's love for all humanity' and 'the reconciliation of sinners through Jesus' mediation.' Pinnock (1) finds both good and bad in other religions, (2) recognizes that as religions are dynamic, they are capable of being influenced by Christianity and influencing Christianity, and (3) defends a wider hope concerning the eschatological destiny of the unevangelized.

In yet another volume, *The Openness of God* (1994), Clark Pinnock and his coauthors pursue this 'paradigm shift' concerning the doctrine of God by arguing that God should not be understood as immutable and aloof, controlling human lives from afar, but as a self-limiting, loving, and suffering father who is affected by humankind. They seek, in other words, to correct a perceived imbalance with regard to the transcendence of God by positing a biblically-based immanence, one congenial to much modern day thinking. God is omnipotent in the classical sense that God is able to do what is consistent with the divine nature. As such God could control humankind if that were God's desire, but God chooses instead to influence the world by persuasion, not force. Here is an option to both classical theism and to process theology.

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[61] Clark H. Pinnock and Robert C. Brow, *Unbounded Love: A Good News Theology for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL, 1994), 8.

c. What then of heresy?

Given evangelical theology's growing shift to defining orthodoxy in terms of a centered set, what then can be said with regard to heresy? Is heresy possible to delimit within an open, yet centered evangelicalism? It would be easy to simply view the subject in linear terms, seeing centered-set thinking as a more recent and superior methodology. And in some ways it is. The disaster occuring in Southern Baptist Seminaries, as heresy both actual and perceived is rooted out, should have few advocates. Surely a kinder and gentler evangelicalism is an advance. But does not God call his people to both proclaim and defend the gospel? Can centered-set evangelicalism also speak of heresy? Should it? What can we say?

1. First, heresy remains a threat to orthodoxy, even as it helps to define it. The possibility of heresy is simply the alter side of some particular confession of Christianity. To deny the possibility of heresy is to deny the reality of fundamental commitments. W. Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* was revolutionary in positing that at times in the history of Christianity, the 'heretical' has preceded the 'orthodox' and has helped to define it.[62] Surely this is true. But at the same time orthodoxy's center has been defined. Within evangelicalism, issues of authority, salvation, and mission provide the continuing foci around which the possibility of heresy exists today.

We say this recognizing that while heresy remains an important concern for evangelicals who have defined their theological thinking in terms of bounded sets, it is an increasingly absent category for evangelicals whose orthodoxy is oriented around a centered set. The intolerance of many fundamentalists and some intransigent evangelicals has caused progressive evangelicals to grow uneasy or even be embarrassed by talk of heresy. The occasional suppression of scholarship in some evangelical institutions for fear that charges of heresy will be brought has only made matters worse. But to give up on heresy is to give up on orthodoxy. To ignore issues of heresy is insufficient, despite the fact that these call for discernment and wisdom beyond which we are able often to provide. Because judicial acts have consequence, because damage can be done to individuals, to the

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[62] W. Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1971; original German edition 1934).

church, and to the gospel, disciplinary action must be a last resort. Even more to the point, the best response to heresy remains a vigorous orthodox evangelical theology, one that is open to new possibilities, self-reflective as to its adequacies and inadequacies, and convincing in its commendation of the truth.

2. Having recognized the need to hold up the possibility of heresy, there remain problems for 'the evangelical denomination ' As evangelical theology has moved from a creedal orientation to a more fluid centering on the gospel, it has lost much of the structure whereby to define, and therefore also defend, Christian orthodoxy. There seem few clearly delineated criteria by which to judge heresy. Perhaps even more pointedly, evangelicalism is a movement, not a denomination, or church. As such it lacks the capacity to adjudicate heresy; heresy is, after all, a judgment of the church.

It is for these reasons that John Stott, after commenting on the debate over the book *The Myth of God Incarnate* notes that concern for God's truth does not undercut the importance of theological exploration, contemporary questioning, or academic freedom. Nevertheless, he calls to task the clergy who wrote in that volume. Have not these clergy taken a vow to uphold and expound the fundamental doctrinal standards of the church?, he writes. After recognizing that questioning is not the same as denial, and that tradition is open to revision, Stott nonetheless calls for his church to exercise ecclesiastical discipline as a last resort. He would rather replace the need for such repressive measures with regard to error with a convincing account of the truth. The best means for evangelicals to root out heresy is to be responsibly engaged in constructive theological work. But the point comes when a church must act.[63]

3. If bounded-set thinking characterized the first generation of American evangelicals as they sought to reform fundamentalism, and if centered-set thinking has characterized much of evangelicalism's second generation, then what awaits evangelicalism's next generation? Is some synthesis possible? Can evangelical orthodoxy avoid the charges from within its community of heresy on the one hand (by bounded-set thinkers against centered-set theology) or idolatry on the other (by centered-set thinkers

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[63] John R.W. Stott, 'Truth, Heresy, and Discipline in the Church,' *Christianity Today* 15 (March 10, 1978), 58–59.

against a bounded-set mentality that confuses human formulation of the truth with truth itself)? Are both traditional and progressive formulations of evangelical orthodoxy inadequate, and if so, how? In a provocative article on the shifting focus of evangelical hermeneutics, Douglas Jacobsen argues that there have been three operative metaphors among American evangelicals—truth, authority, and responsibility.[64] If truth and authority fit as alternate descriptors for bounded-set and centered-set theological orthodoxy, what will be the methodology for an hermeneutic of responsibility? In particular, will orthopraxy find its rightful place in the discussion?

In the eighties, Fuller Theological Seminary began a faculty search process for a position in church history. A leading evangelical candidate was found who had strong scholarly and teaching credentials, but who was a member of a Reformed denomination that did not ordain women. Moreover, the individual believed that there was New Testament validation for his position. Could a school which fully supported the ordination of both men and women for ministry and which had women as one-third of its student body hire someone who opposed that practice? The candidate was not chosen, although much discussion transpired over whether theological and academic freedom necessitated opening the faculty to those who shared Fuller's theological center with regard to biblical authority, but diverged on a question of biblical hermeneutics which had specific consequence with regard to acceptable, community-defined practice. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy needed to be conjoined. Evangelical orthodoxy was indeed entering into its third generation.

6. Conclusion

Evangelicalism has to do with heart, head, and hands. Until recently, however, discussions of evangelical orthodoxy have been limited to the cognitive, to the 'head'. Orthodoxy has been seen as having to do with doctrines, with propositions, and charges of

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[64] Douglas Jacobsen, 'From Truth to Authority to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Evangelical Hermeneutics, 1915–1986,' *TSF Bulletin* 10 (March–April, 1987), 8–15 and (May–June, 1987), 10–14.

heresy have been limited similarly to rationalistic formulations.[65] But Christianity is not only about truth, but about obedience and worship. An adequate understanding of truth does not come apart from active obedience and heartful worship. Similarly, spirituality is made concrete in belief and action. There is a unity of the faculties—feeling, intellect and will—that needs to be taken into account in any evangelical understanding of orthodoxy.

In a review of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, George Hendry once suggested that there are three criteria for judging the adequacy of a theology. Is it teachable? Is it preachable? And is it singable? Hendry had it right (although, as I recall, he judged Tillich one for three). The challenge for evangelicals is to allow their theology to become more wholistic. Orthodoxy—that is, what one evangelical preacher provocatively defined as getting our 'glory' straight—has to do with will and action, not just intellect. Truth cannot be abstracted from life and liturgy. This was the early insight of Carnell and Ramm, and it is being extended by the next generation of evangelicals.

Abstract

What can be said about orthodoxy and heresy within evangelicalism? Using the categorical distinction between 'bounded sets' and 'centered sets,' this article argues that the first generations of evangelicals and those continuing in their stead (e.g, Henry, Wells) have defined orthodoxy primarily as a bounded set of fundamentals focused about truth. Transitional evangelical theologians (e.g., Carnell, Ramm) modulated this thinking by emphasizing the need for loving dialogue and cultural embrace. A second generation of evangelicals have redefined evangelicalism's orthodoxy in terms of a centered set (e.g., Hubbard, Pinnock, Stott). As a result, dialogue is being encouraged both (1) with

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[65] In this regard, readers may be interested in Henry's response to this article when it was first given as a paper at an academic conference. The paper was given at the annual meeting of the American Theological Society in Princeton, NJ, April 7, 1995. Carl Henry, a co-member of the society was unable to attend, but nevertheless offered an immediate and spirited critique of the paper in the magazine *World* ['Boundary Dispute: "Third Wave" Thinkers Argue for a New Theological Center,' *World* (July 15/22, 1995), 25.] Henry rejected any notion of a 'centered-set evangelicalism,' believing this to be 'a dwarfing of orthodox boundaries (and) a relocation of the theological center itself, a center moreover loosed from the epistemic controls that can preserve evangelicalism from evolving, revolving, and devolving.'

wider Christianity and (2) with the larger culture; (3) The importance of community is being recognized; and (4) theological creativity is again being entertained. Yet there are risks. In particular, can a more fluid centering on the gospel allow evangelicals to judge heresy?