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TSF BULLETIN

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

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

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

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

[1] Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Epilogue: The Vitality of Theology," in Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 144.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 145; Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., "Introduction: The Crises of Theology," in Theodore Jennings, ed., *The Vocation of the Theologian*, p. 2.
[3] Theodore Jennings, "The Crises of Theology," p. 4.
[4] The phrase is Sydney Ahlstrom's, "From Puritanism to Evangelicalism: A Critical Perspective," in David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 285.
[5] Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).
[6] James I. Packer, "Taking Stock in Theology," in John King, ed., *Evangelicals Today* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1973), p. 29.
[7] George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).
[8] David F. Wells, "A Strange Turbulence," *Christianity Today*, 30, No. 15 (October 17, 1986), p. 20.
[9] James Packer, "Taking Stock in Theology," p. 29.
[10] Theodore Jennings, "The Vitality of Theology," p. 145.
[11] Paul Holmer, "Contemporary Evangelical Faith: An Assessment and Critique," in David Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals*, p. 78.
[12] John H. Gerstner, "The Theological Boundaries of Evangelical Faith," in David Wells and John Woodbridge, eds., *The Evangelicals*.
[13] Kenneth Kantzer, "The Future of the Church and Evangelicalism," in Donald Hoke, ed., *Evangelicals Face the Future* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978), pp. 132-133.
[14] Carl F.H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958).
[15] Paul Holmer, "Contemporary Evangelical Faith," pp. 82, 90.
[16] Geoffrey Bromiley, "Evangelicals and Theological Creativity," *Themelios* (Sept., 1979), pp. 4-8.
[17] I.M. Crombie, quoted in Gordon D. Kaufman, "Theology as a Public Vocation," in Theodore Jennings, *The Vocation of the Theologian*, p. 49.
[18] Geoffrey Wainwright, "Toward God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 36 (supplementary issue, 1981): 13.
[19] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. xi.
[20] Robert H. King, "Introduction: The Task of Theology," in Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, eds., *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 14.
[21] John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Religions," in Peter Hodgson and Robert King, eds., *Christian Theology*, p. 355.
[22] David Tracy, "Theological Method," in Peter Hodgson and Robert King, eds., *Christian Theology*, p. 50.
[23] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, p. xi.
[24] Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 94, quoted in William A. Dyrness, "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life?" in Robert K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 161.
[25] William Dyrness, "How Does the Bible Function in the Christian Life?", p. 171.
[26] Albert William Levi, *Philosophy as Social Expression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 110, quoted in Dennis Campbell, "The Theologian as Christian Scholar," *Religion in Life*, 45 (Autumn, 1976), pp. 319-320.
[27] Dennis Campbell, "The Theologian as Christian Scholar," p. 320.
[28] *Ibid.*, pp. 320-322.
[29] David Allan Hubbard, *What We Evangelicals Believe* (Pasadena: Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 15.
[30] C. John Weborg, "Reborn in Order to Renew," *Christian History*, 5, No. 2 (1986): 17.
[31] Richard Lovelace, "A Call to Historic Roots and Continuity," in Robert E. Webber and Donald Bloesch, eds., *The Orthodox Evangelicals* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), p. 56.
[32] Gordon Kaufman, "Theology as a Public Vocation," in Theodore Jennings, *The Vocation of the Theologian*, pp. 50-51.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[34] Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
[35] Schubert Ogden, "On Teaching Theology," *Criterion*, 25, No. 1 (Winter, 1986): 12-14.
[36] William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, "Embarassed by God's Presence," *Christian Century*, 102 (January 30, 1985), p. 99.
[37] Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 27.

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

by Douglas Jacobsen

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

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

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

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

where the biblical text meets the contemporary audience. It is not the whole picture, but it defines the foundation upon which the rest of the hermeneutical system is based; and because it is so foundational, it is one of the best means by which to identify the distinctive orientation of any given hermeneutical framework.

My thesis in this article is that three generations of Evangelical biblical interpreters can be identified by three different biblical hermeneutical root metaphors. These "generations" are, on the one hand, capable of being organized chronologically. On the other, they represent, to a certain degree, three different ideal approaches to the Bible, all of which are represented within the contemporary diverse Evangelical panoply. The three metaphors I see as operative in twentieth century American Evangelicalism are: truth, authority, and responsibility.

In chronological terms, a hermeneutic of truth predominated in the Fundamentalist era (for my purposes here I will define that period as roughly 1915-45); a hermeneutic of authority was the majority position in the age of (what I will call here) "Classic" Evangelicalism (1945-75); and a hermeneutic of responsibility has come to the fore in Evangelicalism after 1975 (this last generation I will label Post-Classic Evangelicalism). Contemporary proponents of these different views are hard to identify en mass, but a few representative individuals can be pointed out. John Warwick Montgomery, for example, seems clearly to be operating out of a truth hermeneutic; D.A. Carson, out of an authority hermeneutic; and Robert K. Johnston, out of a responsibility hermeneutic.[2]

While I first became engaged with this subject in an attempt to make sense out of current Evangelical hermeneutical debate, in this article I want to focus primarily on the historical sequencing of these generations. The questions I want to ask and answer are these: (1) Why did this particular understanding of the hermeneutical task come to the fore at this point in time? (2) How was the distinctive hermeneutical root metaphor of each generation expressed? (3) How did the meaphor function in the historical setting of each chronological generation?

Before answering these questions, one important fact should be pointed out. Since my purpose in this article is to isolate the distinctive root metaphors of these three generations of Evangelical thinkers, I will inevitably end up emphasizing differences more than similarities between these generations. That emphasis, which I necessarily must make in this article, should not be interpreted as a total picture of the movement. It is not. Concerns for truth, authority, and responsiblity were important themes for all Evangelicals in the seven decades under discussion. And an essay could profitably be written that traces continuities in the larger Evangelical movement among these lines. Therefore, when I speak of Classic Evangelicalism's emphasis on authority, please do not mistake me for saying that Classic Evangelicals had no regard for responsibility or truth. That would be untrue, as it would also be untrue to say that Fundamentalists lack all concern for authority and responsiblity, or that post-Classic Evangelicals have abandoned the search for truth and a commitment to biblical authority.

The Fundamentalist-Evangelical Generation: The Hermeneutics of Truth

The Fundamentalist movement with its attendant hermeneutic of truth needs to be understood in historical context. Fundamentalists saw themselves as a people under attack—both religiously and nationally. Religiously, they found themselves vehemently criticized by a group of liberal scholars who

seemed (to them) to be denying the very foundations of Christianity. This was expressed most clearly in J. Gresham Machen's charge that liberalism was not only a departure from historic Christian orthodoxy, but an entirely different kind of religion.[3] Nationally, Fundamentalists saw American culture heading toward an "age of insanity"—the words are those of Charles Blanchard.[4] There was a tendency in Fundamentalism to link these two concerns, and that makes logical sense when one remembers that until the end of the nineteenth century Protestant Christianity had been the dominant strand in American culture; and that within that Christian cultural core, a nexus of ideas fairly similar to Fundamentalism's essentials of the faith had defined the religious beliefs of the majority of the nation. The self-assigned task of Fundamentalism was to simultaneously defend the orthodox Christian faith and the cultural hegemony of that faith in the nation. The hermeneutical metaphor that could most make those claims stick was truth. Orthodoxy was the true interpretation of the Bible (i.e., true Christian faith), and that true interpretation of the Bible was also true in an absolute sense and thereby deserving of the most prominent place in the life of the nation. It was some time around the year 1915 that this self-understanding really dawned on the Fundamentalist movement. I am not arguing that a hermeneutical concern with truth was absent from Fundamentalist Evangelicalism before 1915. What did happen around 1915 was that Fundamentalism took on a qualitatively different degree of differentiation of identity from the larger Christian community in America, and that accordingly, the hermeneutical commitments of the movement took on a much more distinctive hue. For example, it is not until around 1915 that Fundamentalists come to see themselves as a clearly defined religious community over against mere conservatism in religion. In any case, 1915 is the year *The Fundamentals* were completed, and after that date no one could claim ignorance of either the issues or the combatants.[5]

Fundamentalism was a complex movement—a mix of academic and popular elements blended together out of a diverse ecclesiastical and theological background. Let me illustrate the prominence of a truth hermeneutic in three different strands of the movement. First I will examine *The Fundamentals*, which I take to represent the mainstream of the movement. Then I will look at R.A. Torrey, the most prominent leader of the Bible teachers' wing of Fundamentalism. And finally, I will turn to J. Gresham Machen who represents the Reformed and most academic side of the Fundamentalist coalition.

The Fundamentals are clear in their assertion that Christianity and the Bible are true. The 1917 reprint edition of the series, in fact, makes that claim part of the title—*The Fundamentals: A Testimony to Truth*. Let me illustrate the tack taken in the collection as a whole by looking at the first essay published in this edition, "The History of Higher Criticism," by Canon Dyson Hague from Toronto.

Hague's basic argument is that while higher criticism is not necessarily bad, "the work of the Higher Critic has not always been pursued in a reverent spirit nor in the spirit of scientific and Christian scholarship." The underlying problem seems to be that scholars in the modern world simply rushed too much. According to Hague, it was a "hurrying age" and few scholars—especially those with a bias against the supernatural—took the time needed to make the careful judgments called for in the work of higher criticism.[6]

It is important to note that Hague has no argument with higher critical methods in and of themselves. In fact, he seems confident that the best scholars—the most careful and scientific—would never find their opinions in conflict with true Christianity. He writes:

The desire to receive all the light that the most fearless search for truth by the highest scholarship can yield is the desire of every true believer in the Bible. No really healthy Christian mind can advocate obscurantism. The obscurant who opposes the investigation of scholarship, and would throttle the investigators, has not the spirit of Christ. In heart and attitude he is a Mediaevalist. To use Bushnell's famous apologue, he would try to stop the dawning of the day by wringing the neck of the crowing cock. No one wants to put the Bible in a glass case.[7]

teaches, and do not wish to read into it their own notions and speculations. It is sometimes said that "you can make the Bible mean almost anything." Yes, you can, but the question is not what you can make it mean, but what God intended it to mean, and that is easy enough to find out provided you wish to find out and will get right down to hard, honest, earnest investigation.[11]

Torrey rarely addressed the question of academically-arrived-at truth and how that might or might not affect Christian faith. His concern for truth, rather, was with what he saw as

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Three generations of Evangelical biblical interpreters can be identified by three different biblical hermeneutical root metaphors: truth, authority, and responsibility.

While Hague felt that the best academically-arrived-at truth would always support the truths of Christianity as Fundamentalists saw them, he did voice two concerns about academic scholarship. The first had to do with the process of becoming academically proficient both as a scholar and as a Christian. Hague argues that "a little learning" often seemed to incline a person away from the truth. If persons should find themselves in this degenerate state, they should be forewarned and encouraged that deeper study and research will restore a conviction about the truth of the Bible and Christianity.[8] Hague's second concern deals with an entirely different situation—that of the academically uneducated. He seems to say that, while the best education will lead one ultimately to truth, no such education is necessary to interpret the Bible accurately. In very strong words, Hague asserts the right of every Christian to make his or her own judgments about the truth, no matter how little formal education they might have had.

> ... it is the duty of every Christian who belongs to the noble army of truth-lovers to test all things and to hold fast that which is good. He also has rights even though he is, technically speaking, unlearned, and to accept any view that contradicts his spiritual judgment simply because it is that of a so-called scholar, is to abdicate his franchise as a Christian and his birthright as a man.[9]

Hague was especially concerned that the believer's "right of private judgment" not be jettisoned in response to the conclusions of "avowedly prejudiced judgment." Scholars who denied all possibility of the supernatural, he argues, are not competent to pass judgment on "the Book that claims to be supernatural."[10] For Hague, "truth" was the final criterion of all biblical interpretation, but this truth could only partly be equated with the rigorous academic pursuit of truth.

R.A. Torrey's concerns overlap Hague's at this point. While well educated himself, Torrey was adamant in the opinion that lay people with very little formal education could understand the Bible and its teaching about Christian life and doctrine as clearly as the academically-credentialed biblical scholar. His whole career was stalked on this belief and nowhere does he lay out his views on the subject more clearly than in the first chapter of his book *The Christ of the Bible.* Torrey states:

> We are to study the actual Christ of this Book, not the Christ that we would like to have or love to dream of, but the Christ that really IS. The Bible is one of the easiest books in the world to understand if men really wish to understand it and to find out what it actually

the subjective and soft-headed spirit of the age which led men to jump to premature conclusions, not having rigorously examined all the evidence. His purpose in writing *The Christ of the Bible* was to show that "the Christ of many modern poets and romancers and philosophers, and also the Christ of the rapidly increasing cults, and even the Christ of many supposedly evangelical preachers and theologians"[12]—"Christs" which all these people claimed to find in the New Testament— simply do not correspond to the picture of Jesus found in the Bible. Torrey's remedy for this situation was a strict methodological inductivism in biblical study. His concern was with truth in the sense of fidelity to what the Bible actually said about any given subject when viewed in its entirety. He placed himself in opposition both to all talk about the Bible that seemed purposely to ignore what the Bible said—that is, he opposed all those who used the Bible disingenuously—and he set himself against all soft-headedness that seemed to miss the plain meaning of the text—that is, he hated stupidity. The implication of Torrey's approach is that the truth or falsity of Christianity can only be ascertained if the message of Christianity as it is announced in the Bible is first stated in an accurate, intelligent, and truthful manner.

While Torrey only implies this last dictum, J. Gresham Machen made it explicit. In an address delivered to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in May of 1927, he lays out his opinion as follows:

> ... if the Christian religion is founded upon historical facts, then there is something in the Christian message which can never possibly change. There is one good thing about facts—they stay put. If a thing really happened, the passage of years can never possibly make it into a thing that did not happen. If the body of Jesus really emerged from the tomb on the first Easter morning, then no possible advance of science can change that fact one whit. The advance of science may conceiveably show that the alleged fact was never a fact at all; it may conceivably show that the earliest Christians were wrong when they said that Christ rose from the dead the third day. But to say that that statement of fact was true for the first century, but because of the advance of science it is no longer true—that is to say what is plainly absurd. The Christian religion is founded squarely upon a message that sets forth facts: if that message is false, then the religion that is founded on it must of course be abandoned; but if it is true, then the Christian Church must still deliver the message, faithfully as it did on the morning of the first Easter Day.[13]

For Machen the issue seemed straightforward. Either Christianity was factually true or it should be discarded as a lie. The liberal position against which he was arguing seemed to him to want to wriggle out of this logical choice of options. Liberals wanted to preach the values of Christianity without having to deal with the sticky issue of whether or not the historical events upon which those values had traditionally been based ever really happened. Interpreting liberalism as two-faced because of this stance, Machen concluded that "modern liberalism could be criticized (1) on the ground that it was un-Christian and (2) on the ground that it was unscientific."[14]

better science will prove the truth of Christianity sounds much like Hague's affirmation that the best scholars are sincere believers. It is interesting to note the optimism that is inherent in each of these positions. Fundamentalist expectations of the future were to prove misplaced, but that should not blind us to the fact they really were optimistic about the future. They thought (hoped) that the "insanity" of their age would soon pass.

The optimism of Machen and Hague is important to note, not only because it seems so ironic in restrospect, but also because it gives us perhaps the best insight into exactly what function Fundamentalism's hermeneutic of truth played in the

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Around 1915, Fundamentalism took on a qualitatively different degree of differentiation of identity from the larger Christian community in America, and accordingly, the hermeneutical commitments of the movement took on a much more distinctive hue.

Machen's critique of liberalism as unscientific deserves further attention. His attack in this regard in really twofold. The first is rather obvious—one cannot play fast and loose with facts and still claim the title scientific. However, there is another consideration. In Machen's view the liberal strategy for rescuing Christianity from the corrosive intrusions of science was bound to fail. He writes:

Admitting that scientific objections may arise against the particularities of the Christian religion—against the Christian doctrines of the person of Christ, and of redemption through his death and resurrection—the liberal theologian seeks to rescue certain of the general principles of religion, of which these particularities are thought to be mere temporary symbols, and these general principles he regards as constituting "the essence of Christianity."

It may well be questioned, however, whether this method of defence will really prove to be efficacious; for after the apologist has abandoned his outer defences to the enemy and withdrawn into some inner citadel, he will probably discover that the enemy pursues him even there . . . Mere consessiveness, therefore, will never succeed in avoiding the intellectual conflict. In the intellectual battle of the day there can be no "peace without victory;" one side or the other must win.[15]

Machen was a consistent thinker. His critique of liberalism as unscientific implied that Fundamentalism needed to be rigorously scientific if it claimed to speak of truth, and he did not shrink from that conclusion. Echoing the optimism that was so typical of the age as a whole, Machen chastened his fellow conservatives for slipping into a liberal-style avoidance of encounter with science and philosophy. Against such a position he argued: "We ought to try to lead scientists and philosophers to become Christians, not by asking them to regard science and philosophy as without bearing upon religion, but on the contrary by asking them to become more scientific and more philosophical through attention to all, instead of some, of the facts."[16] The implications of this position for biblical interpretation are clear. While Machen allowed the logical possibility that Christianity could be disproved by science, he had an overwhelmingly optimistic faith that the Bible simply never would be contradicted by the facts of science.

Machen's position brings us full circle back to Canon Hague's argument in *The Fundamentals.* Machen's assertion that

historical setting of the movement. First let me make explicit the very obvious fact that Fundamentalists almost never actually got down to the business of trying to reconcile science and religion—academically-arrived-at truth and Christianity. What they did do was argue that science and religion, truth and Christianity, were really, underneath it all, compatible— even though on the surface it appeared otherwise. What seems to be going on here is what Clifford Geertz describes as a typical religious response to the problem of bafflement—that point at which we discover the limits of our analytical abilities. The religious response to bafflement, according to Geertz, "is not to deny the undeniable— that there are unexplainable events, that life hurts, or that the rain falls on the unjust— but to deny that there are inexplicable events." He goes on to say that "what is important, to a religious man at least, is that it [i.e., our present inability to explain any particular event] not be the result of the fact that there are no such . . . explanations."[17]

Living in an age that they admitted seemed crazy, Fundamentalists found their hermeneutic of truth to be a useful tool. It gave them a platform that allowed them to address the larger society: The claims of truth are public. But, it simultaneously provided a buffer against bafflement. The world was not really crazy; it only needed to be called back to its senses. Science was not really a threat to religion; it only sometimes seemed so—the best scientists are believers. To notice this social function of Fundamentalism's hermeneutic of truth is not to say that Fundamentalism's intellectual project was either invalid or misconceived. I do think, however, that Fundamentalism's announced hermeneutical agenda was a larger task than that movement could, at its time in history, pull off. And this analysis of Fundamentalism helps explain the later history of the movement.

Fundamentalism's optimism that the truth of Christianity would soon become obvious again, after the insanity of the age had passed, was of course to prove chimerical. The world did not regain its pre-modern senses, and no appeal to truth on the part of Fundamentalists could keep that fact from striking home. By 1930, Fundamentalism was in full flight into separatism (Machen left Princeton in 1929). Since truth, as the Fundamentalists saw it, was being scorned in the public realms of society, the only option seemed to be to establish separate enclaves where truth could be preserved as long as this age of insanity lasted. Fundamentalism's grand scheme of truth thus took on a diminutive form and also an increasingly le-

galistic tone, as concerns for maintaining the boundaries of the community of truth came to take precedent over questions relating to the harmonization of scientific/academic and religious truth. Within these closed communities, dispensationalism rapidly became the leading biblical interpretive framework. This makes sense and supports Fundamentalism's continuing hermeneutical commitment to truth. What dispensationalism is, in a hermeneutical sense, is a neat way of resolving many apparent conflicts in the Bible. It also provides a method by which one can ignore various biblical passages that might not ring true to a twentieth century audience, or that simply might be too uncomfortable to hear. In either of these cases, the "offending" passages are easily relegated to some other age. They just don't apply.

In closing this section, I want to make one last point. Fundamentalism should not necessarily be critiqued for this opting out of the public debate over truth—at least not by us living in the latter years of the twentieth century. The same option, in a different context, is currently receiving a very cordial welcome in the American scholarly community. I refer, of course, to the closing lines of Alasdair MacIntyre's influential *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's concern is with moral not religious/cultural confusion, but his remedy has the aura of deja vu to most American Evangelicals. His solution to the moral schizophrenia of the age?

> What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.[18]

The Classic Evangelical Generation: The Hermeneutics of Authority

Around 1945 a new hermeneutical paradigm emerged within the American Evangelical tradition centering on the root metaphor of authority. This new idea came into being coterminously with what was then called the Neoevangelical movement. Institutionally this movement found representation in the National Association of Evangelicals; later it received a voice in the form of *Christianity Today* magazine. The leaders of the movement are relatively easy to enumerate. Carl F.H. Henry, Bernard L. Ramm, Harold John Ockenga, Frank E. Gaebelein, E.J. Carnell, Harold Lindsell, and Billy Graham stand out as prominent, but others could be added. For all these individuals, for this institutional organization, and for this journal, the authority of the Bible was a watchword. The accomplishments of the Neoevangelical movement are impressive, especially within the evangelical orb of Protestantism in America. In many ways the individuals associated with it placed a stamp on American Evangelicalism that continues to this day. Certainly it was the dominant evangelical position until 1975. It is proper therefore to label this generation the generation of Classic Evangelicalism.

Evangelicals in this era breathed a different air than that of their Fundamentalist forebears. The cultural situation of the nation had shifted significantly, and Classic Evangelicals had accordingly set for themselves different goals than those of the earlier movement. In order to understand the hermeneutical stance of Classic Evangelicalism it is necessary to be attentive to two factors: (1) the negative reaction against Fundamentalism and (2) the positive response to the new situation facing the nation in this era. Both of these concerns fed into the configuration of the movement as it developed.

The Classic Evangelical view of American history between the years c.1930 and 1945 ran something like this: the Fundamentalist decision to flee the public realm of society and withdraw into separatism had left a large gap in the larger culture. Fundamentalists might have succeeded in protecting their own particular worldview, but the impact on the American society as a whole had been to hasten the public de-Christianization of life. During the war years and immediately following, however, the atmosphere changed. Scientists and secularists seemed to have lost their confidence. They were faltering. The culture as a whole seemed to be coming to the conclusion that it was in a state of crisis, and that crisis was largely a crisis of authority. Into the gap stepped the Neoevangelical movement. This was no time for defensive withdrawal. Now was the time to reemerge into public view. Classic Evangelicals sensed the age was ripe to hear the "Word of God" announced with authority. The time for tedious proofs of the truth of the Bible was past. Rather than lamenting the fact that this was a "hurrying age," as Canon Hague had argued in *The Fundamentals*, Classic Evangelicals sought hurriedly to seize the day. Their strategy was to preach with authority from the Word of God (using the most contemporary forms of media) and to call on people to respond in the moment (for today was the hour of decision).

The above rendering of the rise of Classic Evangelicalism is not necessarily inaccurate, but it is an in-house analysis and one that is at least slightly suspect given the high compliments it gives itself. Most Classic Evangelical self-descriptions paint the movement as a step up from Fundamentalism—they retained all the good points of Fundamentalism but had good manners and charm to boot. That is, pardon the phrase, not quite the Gospel truth.

Yes, Classic Evangelicalism does look good compared to the generation that immediately preceded it—one of decadent Fundamentalism—but compared to the original Fundamentalist generation it is pale. Classic Evangelicals claimed that they, unlike their Fundamentalist forebears, were willing to dialogue with non-E/evangelicals in a scholarly, not judgmental, manner. However, these Classic Evangelicals rarely noted the fact that they could choose with whom they would debate. The Fundamentalists of 1915-30 did not have the pleasure of choosing their debating companions. They had to fight "heretics" within their own denominations. The scope of the classical evangelical task is also, in a sense, diminuative when compared to that of the original fundamentalist generation. Fundamentalists had hoped to maintain the "Christian-ness" of the entire culture. The fact that they lost that battle does nothing to diminish the grandeur of their aspirations. Classic Evangelicals, by contrast, had the relatively easy task of needing only to assert their own point of view; they eschewed the need to defend the truth of the Christian faith and fell back to the relatively safe turf of authoritative pronouncement. Finally, there was an internal inconsistency in Classic Evangelicalism that was lacking in the early Fundamentalist movement. While Classic Evangelicals talked a good line about openness to the culture, they did so while actively constructing a super separatism—an alternative subcultural enclave—in which to live. Classic Evangelical encounters with non-evangelicals were often billed as "dialogues," but they rarely moved beyond the level of apologetics—missionary forays into non-evangelical turf.

Whatever the possible plusses or minuses of the movement

when viewed in historical context, the hermeneutical center of the movement seems, beyond doubt, to have been authority. In discussing the authority hermeneutic of Classic Evangelicalism, I would like to cover the broad gamut of the movement in a manner similar to the discussion of Fundamentalist truth hermeneutics above. The contours of Classic Evangelicalism are, of course, not nearly so precise as those of the earlier movement. The positions taken by the National Association of Evangelicals and *Christianity Today* are of obvious importance. Beyond dealing with these two sources of Classic Evangelical ideas, I will also look at the opinions of two of the most prominent early mainstream thinkers in the movement—Carl F.H. Henry and E.J. Carnell—and at one "left-wing" member of the Classic Evangelical coalition—Dewey M. Beegle.

The constitution of the National Association of Evangelicals as it was formulated in 1942 includes a short six point "doctrinal basis" of the organization. The first article reads: "That we believe the Bible to be inspired, the only infallible, authoritative word of God." The prominence of the Bible in the NAE is obvious—belief in the authority of the Bible even takes precedent over belief in the Trinity, which is the second doctrinal article of the institution. The word truth, however, is never mentioned in connection with the Bible. One might suggest that the concept of truth is inherent in the term "infallible." I would agree. And, I think that truth did play a role in the Classic Evangelical view of the Bible. But, it also seems clear that the relative place of truth as a concept through which the Bible can be made relevant to its modern audience has slipped a good notch from its place of prominence in Fundamentalist rhetoric.[19]

Arguments from silence are by themselves relatively weak, but other documents relative to the founding of the NAE back the points outlined above. In the opening address to the assembled conference that launched the NAE on its way, Harold John Ockenga never once mentioned the truth of the Bible. What he discussed in his remarks, entitles "The Unvoiced Multitudes," was: (1) "the unrepresented masses of Christians," (2) God's promise of power" to change the world, and (3) that "there must be a technic for our purpose." He spoke several times of "true Christians" and of "the True Church," but not of the truth of the Bible. His conclusion reads as follows:

> I say again that we have every reason in the world to believe that there will be a great ingathering of souls before the end of the age. Now is the time for us to do our preaching; now is the time for us to reach out in a frank and positive way. Who knows but what this Council has stepped into the gap for an hour as this?[20]

Ockenga wanted "true Christians" to band together to use the Bible. Now was not the time to quibble over matters of fact and truth. The job before them, as Classic Evangelicals saw it, was immense and urgent. What it called for was not the tedious work of searching for truth, but the effectiveness of simply speaking with authority.

At this point let me interrupt the flow of people and events to address the issue (I think ultimately a side issue) of the inerrancy, or, differently worded, the infallibility of the Bible. The NAE clearly subscribed to the infallibility as well as the authority of the Bible. Doesn't this ascription include truth as a hermeneutical norm? My answer to this is a definite yes and no. Yes, questions of truth did not just evaporate in Classic Evangelicalism. Nor have they since. To disregard truth altogether would, I think, place one outside the evangelical orb.

But, I must also answer no. When Classic Evangelicals spoke of the infallibility of the Bible they only rarely bent the discussion toward topics of truth. Their main use of the term seems to relate only to two issues: (1) whether or not infallibility as a doctrine was explicitly taught by the Bible itself, and (2) the simple fact that a stress on the infallibility of the Bible was pragmatically useful as an encouragement to the faithful and as a critique of liberalism that went down well with the general population.

I do not want glibly to set aside two decades of evangelical spilled ink on the subject of infallibility. But I do think that with regard to the question of hermeneutical stance, it is a secondary concern—at least it was for the founders of Classic Evangelicalism. Later, infallibility did become a shibboleth within the ranks of Classic Evangelicalism. And infallibility has in some recent arguments been interpreted as a hermeneutical commitment—e.g., in recent ETS debate over the membership status of Robert Gundry. But, I think this shift within Classic Evangelicalism coincides with a regression in the movement (similar to that which occured in Fundamentalism in the 1930s and early 40s). Infallibility became a burning issue only in the 60s and 70s when Classic Evangelicals were beginning to sense the limits of their hermeneutic of authority. In an era when established certainties begin to feel inexplicably as if they are weakening, an increasing ossification of those established (and formerly more flexible) positions often occurs. I think this did occur in Classic Evangelicalism and I think it has to a significant degree obscured our vision of the central hermeneutical strategies of the movement. Enough of a digression; back to the story.

What was implicit through its absence in the NAE position—i.e., the shift of hermeneutical focus *away* from truth to authority—was later to be made explicit in Classic Evangelicalism. This shift happened to the movement as a whole, but perhaps it is most visible in the lives of individuals. Billy Graham, writing in the first issue of the first volume of *Christianity Today* (October 15, 1956)—and I am assuming that Graham's position was also that of *CT* itself—reflected on his experience in the following manner:

> In 1949 I had been having a great many doubts concerning the Bible. I thought I saw apparent contradictions in Scripture. Some things I could not reconcile with my restricted concept of God. When I stood up to preach, the authoritative note so characteristic of all great preachers of the past was lacking. Like hundreds of other young seminary students, I was waging the intellectual battle of my life. The outcome would certainly affect my future ministry.
>
> In August of that year I had been invited to Forest Home, Presbyterian conference center high in the mountains outside of Los Angeles. I remember walking down a trail, tramping into the woods, and almost wrestling with God. I dueled with my doubts, and my soul seemed to be caught in the crossfire. Finally, in desperation, I surrendered my will to the living God revealed in Scripture. I knelt before the open Bible and said: "Lord, many things in this Book I do not understand. But thou hast said, 'The just shall live by faith.' Here and now, by faith, I will reserve judgment until I receive more light. If this pleases Thee, give me authority as I proclaim Thy word, and through that authority convict me of sin and turn sinners to the Savior."
>
> Within six weeks we started our Los Angeles crusade, which is now history. During the crusade I discovered the secret that changed my ministry. I stopped trying to prove the Bible was true. I had settled in my own mind

that it was, and this faith was conveyed to the audience. Over and over again I found myself saying "The Bible says." I felt as thought I were merely a voice through which the Holy Spirit was speaking.

Authority created faith. Faith generated response, and hundreds of people were impelled to come to Christ.

For Graham, to ask the question of the truth of the Bible was to miss the point. The crucial fact was that the Bible was authoritative—it was literally God's Word—and its truthfulness had to be assumed by faith as part of one's faith in the God it proclaimed. This kind of "truthfulness"—authoritative truthfulness—was not susceptible to rational debate or empirical testing. For Classic Evangelicals, the authority of the Bible ultimately had to be accepted or rejected as a primary faith commitment. However, they were quick to point out, as Graham does above, that this more-or-less fideistic acceptance of the authority of the Bible was not a decision that had to be made with blind faith. There was pragmatic proof that such a stance was the correct one: It produced converts. Such an argument may or may not be seen as theologically appropriate—few Classic Evangelicals would want to admit such pragmatic proofs into any other aspect of their theologizing—but it does reveal the deep transformation that had taken place in the preceding two or three decades. In the years 1915-30, Fundamentalistic Evangelicals had argued that the claims of the Bible had to be understood to be true to be accepted. Now, the acceptance of the authority of the Bible had been totally removed from the realm.

Edward J. Carnell's opinion regarding hermeneutics and authority is essentially the same as Graham's, but he phrases his position differently and has a few distinctive emphases. Writing in 1957, in a volume edited by John Walvoord entitled *Inspiration and Interpretation*, Carnell gives the following "working criterion" of the Classic Evangelical hermeneutical stance toward the Bible: "Religious thinkers will submit to the Bible only as they despair of learning the meaning of life without assistance from God." This articulation of the Classic Evangelical viewpoint comes in an essay that critiques Reinhold Niebuhr's use of the Bible. Carnell admits that Niebuhr wants to appeal authoritatively to the Bible at different points in his argument to support his case, but he concludes that Niebuhr's selective use of the Bible as an authority simply is not a consistent and coherent position. According to Carnell, one either accepts the Bible whole as being from God and thus authoritative, or one loses the right to appeal to the authority of the Bible. Niebuhr's desire to maintain what Carnell calls "a critical autonomy over the biblical text" ultimately deconstructs any appeals to authority Niebuhr might want to make. Filtered through the subjectivity of the human selection process, in which certain passages of the Bible are declared authoritative while others are shrugged off as irrelevant, the appeal to biblical authority loses all its power. On Carnell's theological map, the road to authority is labeled submission.[21]

Lest this position seem absolutely stark and unbending, let me talk about the flip side—how Carnell contrasted this position with that Fundamentalism. In an essay entitled "Orthodoxy: Cultic and Classical" which appeared in the March 30th, 1960 issue of the *Christian Century*, Carnell critiqued Fundamentalism (especially the Fundamentalism of the 1930s and 40s) for its cold obsession with truth. Fundamentalists, he says, thought they possessed unalloyed truth. As a corollary they also thought they had a monopoly on virtue and accordingly they denounced all who disagreed with them as apostate. Carnell says this had been his own position until he "awoke from dogmatic slumber." It suddenly dawned on him that inclusion in the Church—being a Christian—was not a

function of the truths possessed, ·but of God's grace which operated through faith and repentence. Carnell came to the conclusion that Fundamentalism had confused sanctification (which includes for Carnell "doctrinal maturity") with justification. They had traded in God's grace for doctrinal legalism. Carnell's relief at having his Christian faith freed from the burden of Fundamentalist scholasticism is palpable:

I know that much of this will sound elemetary to outsiders. But to one reared in the tyrannical legalism of fundamentalism, the recovery of a genuine theology of grace is no insignificant feat. The feat calls for a generous outlay of intellectual honesty and personal integrity.[22]

All of Carnell's thinking needs to be understood in the light of this heartfelt experience of grace. Even the seemingly harsh language of submission that Carnell uses to critique Niebuhr and other "liberals" is at its core rooted in this understanding of grace. Carnell states that the Classic Evangelical emphasis on the authority of the Bible is, in its first sense, a religious affirmation rather than a theological dictate. The norm of submission to the word of God:

Simply means that since sin is a personal rebellion against God, and since rebellion is an expression of human self-sufficiency, it follows that the natural man will not yield to the revealed word of God until it interests him, and it will never interest him until he discovers profit in such a submission. Whenever God's voice is of neither interest nor profit, man will remain autonomous. Only as one hungers for Scripture will he conform to its teachings.[23]

The writings of Carl F.H. Henry add another dimension to our understanding of the Classic Evangelical hermeneutic of authority, especially regarding the turn away from appeals to truth in hermeneutics. The world Henry addressed had changed vastly since the turn of the century—since the early years of Fundamentalism. "Science," that bugaboo against which Fundamentalism had alternatively fulminated against as the epitome of modern anti-supernaturalism and lauded as the final grounding of Christian faith, seemed to have lost its appeal to the great majority of Americans. To ask if the Bible was scientifically true was to ask a poorly posed question in the 1940s—at least that was how Henry saw it:

Who today believes in the adequacy of the scientific method to answer all our problems? . . . Who today does not see that the scientific method now· has given us a monster so terrible that we all need to be saved from it? No promise of deliverance lies in a weapon worse than the atomic bomb, for that can only multiply our predicament. Who does not sense that the yearning heart of man today reaches for some power beyond nature, some method beyond the scientific, to govern the fickle human temper, lest in the conviction that nature alone speaks the last word, it be to atomic might that men tomorrow will resort in defining what is good and what is true?[24]

For Henry the appeal to good science, even to the best science, was misplaced. Whether or not science should be able to prove the Bible true was beside the point—as well as being presumptuously arrogant about the potential of the human intellect. Viewing developments in this light, Henry interpreted the public faltering of faith in the language of scientific objectivity as a step forward for Evangelicals. It was that faltering of scientific faith that had made the Classic Evangelical "revelation method" (read authority) once again so timely.

Henry intoned that it was "the proclamation of God's self-disclosure in the written Word and in the living Word Christ Jesus, that alone can resolve the corrosive uncertainty of the confused mid-twentieth century mind."[25] Henry's words did not fall on deaf ears. By the mid 1940s even liberal scholars had come to the point of admitting that a positivistic approach to the Bible was not possible. We either approach the Bible as a religiously authoritative book or not. And it is simple fact that our attitudes do affect our scholarship. Truth as a goal seems clearly to have fallen in esteem on all fronts. Further evidence of this development can be found in the life and career of Dewey Beegle.

Beegle's life illustrates both the overwhelming centrality of authority in Classic Evangelicalism and the limits of the movement. The typical way of looking at Beegle is to locate him in the left-wing of Classic Evangelicalism (i.e., that wing of the movement that did not think that language of inerrancy or infallibility was needed to assure the authority of the Bible). His peers recognized him as part of the movement because of his commitment to authority as the primary hermeneutical stance evangelicals must take. But simultaneously Classic Evangelicals have always relegated him to the margin of the movement because he just was not a party line person.

In *The Inspiration of Scripture,* Beegle affirms the importance of authority in the Classic Evangelical movement. His treatment of the subject follows typical lines. Authority convinces; and without convincement people don't believe the wonderful things God has done; and if people cease to believe all that God has done the power of God in their lives seems to evaporate. While recognizing all of this, Beegle also noted (along with Carnell) the very basic religious nature of the issue. "Humble submission to the Christ back of Scripture is far more crucial than one's doctrine of revelation and inspiration."[26] But, Beegle also recognized something else: Authority, if it is to have staying power, must be based on truth. Without such a base all claims to authority ring hollow. The main thrust of his book is that inerrancy must be given up, because it misrepresents the actual nature of the biblical text as we know it (i.e., because it is untrue), so that the authority of the Bible will remain. Let me hop, skip, and jump through three short quotations from *The Inspiration of Scripture:*

> Anyone who has experienced the regenerating power of Christ comes to Scripture with the assurance that it "has the words of eternal life." Where new evidence proves that some statements of God's Word is inaccurate, one can readily accept the fact knowing that the essential truths will never be altered . . .(182)
>
> Difficult though it may be to understand, God chose to make his authority relevant to man by means which necessitate some element of fallibility. Whether we like to think of authority in such terms is beside the point. The facts permit no other understanding of Scripture's inspiration and authority . . .(186)
>
> It is time that all Christians make certain that their foundation is in Christ and his view of Scripture. Gnawing fears will vanish, and vision and power will take their place. We need to be about the affairs of God's Kingdom and that means being on the offensive with the proclamation of the gospel.[27] (188)

Beegle's message is at its core the same as that of all Classic Evangelicals. The world needs the gospel, and it is at this point in time ready to hear it. We have an authoritative message to proclaim. Let us lay aside the disputes that have torn us apart and be about our task. But he goes beyond this. Let us not make inerrancy our new doctrinal legalism to replace the old

Fundamentalist legalisms from which we have freed ourselves, he says. Let us be true to truth as we are attentive to God's message in the Bible. We must come to honest grips with the nature of the authoritative revelation God has given us. If we really think the Bible is authoritative, let us accept it as it is—let us not try to polish it up better than God made it. In an odd way Beegle is simultaneously more conservative and more liberal than the Classic Evangelical mainline. He never wanted to let go of the truth hermeneutic of early twentieth century Fundamentalism, and he precurses in many ways the turn to responsibility in recent years.

In summary, what can be said about the Classic generation of Evangelicals and their distinctive hermeneutical emphasis on authority? How successful were they at making their hermeneutical metaphor work? I think overall it worked rather well. The audience they sought to address was one that both hungered for authority and thought it could be found. The Classic Evangelical message that the authority their generation needed was to be found in the Bible met that need. While thus connecting the Bible to the concerns of the wider culture, Classic Evangelicalism's emphasis on authority also helped Evangelicals better define exactly what separated them from that larger culture—and it did that in a much less cold-hearted way than the generation of Fundamentalists that had immediately preceded them.

In its popular cash-out, the simultaneous separating and connecting potential of Classic Evangelicalism's hermeneutic of authority set the stage for this generation's notable achievements in the area of evangelism. Their hermeneutic of authority both allowed their audience to hear the message of the gospel and set up a boundary line over which people who heard that message could step to accept that authority—the latter being a necessary condition for any call to conversion. The importance of conversion is central to this hermeneutic, and the natural fit between this method and Evangelicalism's long lasting commitment to Evangelism is obvious.

On the scholarly level, Classic Evangelicalism's hermeneutic of authority pushed Evangelicals to develop their exegetical skills to the level of real excellence. If the Bible is taken really to be authoritative, the important thing is to understand what it says. In this concern to understand what the Bible says, Classic Evangelicals almost always concentrated on the plain and straightforward meanings of the text. Authoritative texts cannot, afterall, be obtuse writings. Their meanings must be readily available. And, that is exactly how evangelicals of this generation exegeted the Bible. To perform this exegesis well only two tools are essential: the study of language and the study of the historical setting of the text (of course text criticism should also be mentioned here, but that is more a pre-hermeneutical tool than a hermeneutical tool proper). This combination of requirements made the historico-linguistic method of study clearly the hermeneutical tool of choice for Classic Evangelicals.

If the world had stood still, this combination of religious interpretive community and hermeneutical root metaphor seems as natural a marriage as any that could ever be hoped for. However, the world did not oblige Classic Evangelicals by standing still. And that changing world has in recent years called forth yet a third root hermeneutical metaphor by which Evangelicals are seeking to understand the Bible and relay that message to the world at large.

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*Look for Part II in the
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