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SHORT STUDY

CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE NEW SCHOOL

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American evangelicalism has reached a stage in its history where it has become more reflective about its past. This historical consciousness is evident in the vast increase of scholarly literature about the movement. Recent works by three of the leading interpreters of evangelicalism are particularly helpful in understanding recent evangelical history. Carl Henry's autobiography is a candid recollection by evangelicalism's leading theologian. George Marsden's history of Fuller Theological Seminary is a study of one of the movement's most significant institutions. Mark Noll's analysis of the growth of evangelical biblical scholarship describes the chief doctrinal affirmation of evangelicalism: biblical authority.[1] These three works all shed light on contemporary evangelicalism from different perspectives.

There is one aspect of contemporary evangelicalism that has eluded careful analysis. Yet it is a feature of the movement that is documented by all three books. This feature is the triumph of New School theology in evangelicalism. Of course, the New School character of evangelicalism is the central theme of none of the three books, and their authors may not agree with this proposition. But each book reveals, in complementary ways, that this is so and how it has come about.

New School Presbyterianism was a nineteenth century movement that transformed the church from a "theologically oriented and well-informed Calvinism" to a "non-theologically oriented and often

[1] Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986); George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

poorly informed conservative Protestantism."[2] Its rejection of strict confessionalism and its emphasis on pietism and revivalism created tensions with the Old School that led to a split in the Presbyterian church in 1837. After that split the New School influence spread far beyond Presbyerianism. It was a broadly Calvinistic, interdenominational movement that had a wide influence on the nineteenth century American evangelical empire. It has been argued that New School Presbyterianism is the progenitor of both twentieth-century liberalism and fundamentalism.[3] While we must heed the warning against "any over-simplified attempt to extend the Old School-New School line of cleavage" into twentieth-century debates,[4] this analysis will suggest that contemporary evangelicalism is also an heir to the New School. The New School's legacy to evangelicalism is especially evident in the latter's nondenominationalism and anticonfessionalism, features that are documented in the three books under examination.

I

Carl Henry's stature as contemporary evangelicalism's foremost theologian is firmly established. That he is always referred to as an "evangelical theologian" and not a "Baptist theologian" is indicative of the nondenominational character of his ministry, and this is substantiated in his autobiography. During his student days, Wheaton College developed an "antidenominational spirit" (p. 67), the result of a decline of mainline denominations and the perceived pride of the new splinter groups like the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. It was enough, Henry wrote, to make him a Baptist: "Whatever early

[2] George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970) 2. This is the most helpful analysis of New School theology. Together, this work, his *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford, 1980), and *Reforming Fundamentalism* form an interesting trilogy on American evangelicalism.

[3] On liberalism see Lefferts A. Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954); on fundamentalism see George M. Marsden, "The New School Heritage and Presbyterian Fundamentalism," *WTJ* 32 (1969–70) 129–47.

[4] Loetscher, *The Broadening Church*, 27.

inclination I then had of possibly seeking Presbyterian ordination and ministry was discouraged by the condemnatory spirit and one-sided propaganda of the 'come-out-ers' and the machine-loyalty of the 'stay-in-ers.' " For a theologian, this is a startling confession. Most pilgrimages of this kind are the result of profound wrestling over ecclesiology or sacramental theology. But Henry records nothing of the sort.

Nor did Henry find refuge in the Northern Baptist Convention, as the Presbyterian debates of the thirties were repeated by the Baptists a decade later (p. 90). Henry turned parachurch and after he left his teaching post at Northern Baptist Seminary he no longer exercised leadership in the institutional church. Among the parachurch organizations that Henry helped found were the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller Theological Seminary, the Pasadena Christian Businessmen's Committee and their annual Rose Bowl Sunrise service,[5] the Evangelical Theological Society, Billy Graham Crusades, and *Christianity Today*.

According to Henry the founding faculty of Fuller was an energetic crew. But conspicuously absent from their work was leadership in the visible church. On the one hand, Fuller's founders were marginalized in mainline denominations by their evangelical convictions; many of them were denied entrance in the Southern California Presbytery of the United Presbyterian Church. And on the other hand, they repudiated the "come-out-ism" of the separatists. But ironically this stance resulted in another form of "come-out-ism": a deliberate desire to work for the kingdom through parachurch means.

Fuller had an increasingly effective ministry, in part because its parachurch structure matched that of evangelicalism at large. Henry described it as the "corporate center of evangelical research and writing" (p. 169), and he characterized life in Pasadena positively as a "cooperative interdenominational life of vigorous evangelical churches" (p. 192).

In 1956 Henry left Fuller for *Christianity Today*. During his twelve-year tenure there he appreciated the "regulative influence" (p. 205) that the magazine had on evangelicalism: it was the "unofficial voice of established evangelical opinion" (p. 382). These were responsibilities that theologians in the past reserved for the visible church.

[5] The parachurch nature of this organization was essential to its success, Henry emphasized. At his insistence its ministry was carried out only through local lay leaders (p. 119).

The magazine wrestled with issues that concerned the resurgent evangelical movement such as revelation, Christology, and evangelism, but rarely, it seems, with ecclesiology.

After leaving *Christianity Today* in 1968, Henry continued an active ministry of teaching and writing. Two things seemed to characterize his labors: they were always on behalf of the vaguely defined "evangelical movement," and the doctrinal identity of that movement was generally reduced to the debate over biblical inerrancy.[6] Occasionally Henry laments the lack of cohesion in evangelicalism. He expresses concern that the questions of confessional orthodoxy are clouded (p. 387), and he confesses at least once the failure to address the "neglected issue of evangelical ecclesiology" (p. 384). Nevertheless, it was the movement, not the visible church, to which Henry's ministry was committed.

Indeed, his book closes with the hope that evangelicalism may yet cooperate sucessfully in matters of renewal, evangelism, and social engagement. This is an endorsement of the New School agenda, and there is no hint that the New School indifference to ecclesiology and confessionalism may explain the failures of the evangelical movement, failures he so candidly describes.

II

George Marsden's history of Fuller Seminary is a case study of evangelicalism through an examination of one of its main institutions.[7] While Marsden's methodology tends to force him to downplay other institutions that have helped to "reform fundamentalism," he argues persuasively that Fuller is the *key* institution for the evangelical movement. One of the strengths of Marsden's book, and of particular interest to us, is his description of Fuller as a New School phenomenon. Marsden writes that "Fuller Seminary was unmistakably 'New School.' " While Founding President Harold Ockenga proposed a "New Princeton" (pp. 24, 119), that is, a new seminary to carry on the Old School objectives of Princeton Seminary before its reorganization in 1929, Marsden shows this to be contradictory with the New School characteristics present from the start: "Though those at Fuller frequently spoke of carrying on the Old Princeton heritage,

[6] See, for example, his description of his tenure at Eastern Baptist Seminary (pp. 323ff).

[7] See William Barker's review elsewhere in this issue.

they were in fact considerably closer to the spirit of the New School" (p. 119).

As Henry's autobiography showed, the denominational attitude of the Fuller faculty showed New School sentiments. Many of them remained in the Presbyterian church but became "functional congregationalists," deliberately isolating themselves from denominational involvement. Some of these remained in the church precisely because they *could* be functionally congregationalist. Marsden cites the case of Wilbur Smith, "independence-minded as anyone, [who argued] for remaining in the Presbyterian ministry on the anomalous grounds that in it he was as free as 'if I were the pastor of a church entirely independent of any ecclesiastical organization' (pp. 42–43)".

The seminary became even more New School as the years went on. The Presidency of E. J. Carnell continued this trend. "The crowning of the seminary . . . must be in the spirit of tolerance" (p. 148), he said in his inaugural address. Carnell's doctrinal tolerance was a clear rejection of Old School principles. Indeed, Carnell was later to describe Machen's Old School principles as "cultic."[8] After Carnell's death, an unnamed Old School Southern Presbyterian candidate for the Presidency was rejected (p. 217), and under the Presidency of David Hubbard the faculty could be described as only "vaguely reformed," a far cry from the Old Princeton model of the founders. Hubbard went on to create new alliances with American evangelicalism, moving the seminary away from a strict inerrantist position (p. 230).

All of this indicates a clear New School direction. But the ultimate victory of the New School at Fuller is symbolized in the coming of Donald McGavran and the Institute of Church Growth. While McGavran offered innovative techniques that caused Fuller to do some rethinking about missiology, Marsden argues that there were affinities between McGavran and evangelicalism at a deeper level that permitted him to succeed. McGavran's pragmatism, his attention to marketing considerations, and his mastery of technique were all rooted in the nineteenth century New School revivalism of Charles Finney, who replaced "Calvinism with milder, more preachable doctrines in most of American revivalism" (p. 243).

[8] E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959) 114–17.

Through these developments, Fuller epitomized the New School, and the founding vision of the school was lost. Marsden writes that "an acute observer in the mid-1960s would soon note that no one talked anymore about Fuller being the continuation of the Old Princeton" (p. 245), and he concludes that "one way to read the first 30 years of the seminary's history is as the triumph of the New School elements in the tradition over the Old School" (p. 296).

III

According to Mark Noll, twentieth-century evangelical biblical scholarship is a life in two worlds: the world of faith and the world of criticism. As Noll traces several phases of the relationship of those two commitments, he paints a generally positive picture: "evangelical scholarship on Scripture enjoys considerable good health" (p. 141).

But Noll goes on to point out that evangelical scholarship has grown in large part because it has divorced itself from denominational control. The rise of biblical scholarship occurred along with the professionalization of academic life. One characteristic of professionalization was an "orientation to academic peers instead of the general community" (p. 33). Noll contrasts this with earlier commitments: "As late as 1875, virtually every American who could be called an expert in the study of Scripture sustained some kind of a denominational connection and devoted the results of bibical scholarship to the ongoing spirituality of the church" (ibid.).

This new allegiance characterized at first mainline Protestant biblical criticism. But it was gradually to characterize evangelical scholarship as well; the academic community became more central to their work than the community of faith.

The renaissance of evangelical biblical criticism was enhanced by the establishment of a parachurch "quasi-denominational" network. Denominational entanglements only hindered the work of the biblical scholar. Eventually, evangelical biblical scholarship not only divorced itself from the church, it began to take on itself the characteristics of the church. It is significant that the two recent "heresy trials" of evangelical scholars, Robert H. Gundry and J. Ramsey Michaels, took place not in the courts of the church but in the academic courts: the Evangelical Theological Society and Gordon-Conwell Seminary.

Like Henry's assessment of *Christianity Today,* Noll applauds the regulative effect that the academy exercises on the church. " 'Be-

lieving criticism' heralds a new maturity among evangelicals" (p. 165). But the question that Noll's history raises is whether or not a parachurch organization is capable of defining and defending orthodoxy. There is the suggestion that the academy has changed orthodoxy: "The very success of those who, during World War II and shortly thereafter, pushed evangelicals toward more serious academic work has created a fluid situation where boundaries are not as clear as they once had been" (pp. 162–63).

Noll hints at the difficulty when he argues that evangelical biblical scholars must work harder at communicating skillfully to the church. But he recognizes at the same time that the problems exist not only with the scholars. Evangelical churches are ill-prepared to receive their scholarly findings. "Evangelicalism, which by its very nature favors commitment over reflection, has not promoted sophisticated hermeneutics" (p. 179), and "the democratic and activistic tendencies of modern evangelicalism work against the development of theoretical depth" (p. 180).

Conclusions

The books by Henry, Marsden, and Noll all shed light in different ways on the pervasiveness of the New School in contemporary evangelicalism. What conclusions can we draw from the picture that has emerged from these accounts? We can find at least four:

1. The parachurch character of evangelicalism. This is hardly revelatory; it is a point that has been made elsewhere.[9] But what is striking, especially from Henry, is the sense of how denominationalism is to be *avoided;* how ecclesiastical structures interfere with the evangelical movement. Henry's commitment "for Christ and his Kingdom" (to use the motto of his alma mater) does not seem to work itself out through the church.

2. The abandonment of the vision of J. Gresham Machen. Henry, Fuller Seminary, and evangelical scholarship in general have all, at one time, claimed the Machen legacy, but, fifty years after his death,

[9] " 'Evangelicals' and 'parachurch' have become nearly synonymous in recent decades," writes Joel Carpenter (*Christianity Today* 30 no. 15 [October 17, 1986] 27).

none shows Machen's influence in any significant measure.[10] Machen's defense of fundamentalism in the battle with modernism in the 1920s and 1930s was not based on a "mere evangelicalism." It was tied to his confessional and ecclesiastical commitments, commitments that evangelicalism was to reject.

3. Evangelical failure to reach adequate confessional unity. The problems that Fuller experienced over inerrancy were not unique; they foreshadowed the problems that other evangelical institutions were to experience, such as the Evangelical Theological Society. Inerrancy became the principal confessional standard for New Schoolers, but history has taught that, by itself, inerrancy fails as a confessional standard.

In making inerrancy a litmus test, evangelicals have often pitted themselves against noninerrantist liberals. But their test also draws another line, this one between New School and Old School. The evangelical obsession with inerrancy is an inheritance from its fundamentalist past; it is not characteristic of the Old School. Marsden describes how one confessional institution refused to isolate inerrancy as its sole doctrinal affirmation: "[A]t Machen's Westminster Seminary, where there was, for conservative reasons, some uneasiness with formulating new sets of 'essential' doctrines, inerrancy was not made a creedal test, even though it was greatly emphasized as a teaching" (p. 113).

4. The dubious future of American evangelicalism. Finally, the triumph of the New School may provide at least partial historical support to the sociological claim made by James Davison Hunter that evangelicalism is losing its "symbolic boundaries." Appeals to confessional standards are often despised by evangelical "progressives" as anti-intellectual, arrogant, and narrow-minded. Sociologically, this evangelical moderation is a form of accommodation to the complex forces of modernity that Hunter's analysis describes. Theologically, it is indicative of the influence of the New School. The result, notes Hunter, is a loss of "binding address" for evangelical-

[10] I thank Darryl Hart for this observation. See "Machen and his Legacy," chapter 9 of Hart's dissertation, " 'Dr. Fundamentalis': An Intellectual Biography of J. Gresham Machen, 1881–1937" (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, 1988).

ism, and thus he finds "reasonable grounds for pessimism" about the future of contemporary evangelicalism.[11]

Orthodoxy lives in the church, and it is defined by the creeds of the church. When evangelical leaders deny their ecclesiastical obligations and confessional commitments, the inevitable result is the loss of evangelical orthodoxy. Unless that lesson is learned, we may experience the ultimate triumph of the New School: the demise of contemporary evangelicalism.

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[11] James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 203.