Van Harvey, the author of the excerpt below, was my predecessor in the Department of Religious Studies. In 1996, the year I arrived at Stanford, he reissued his first major book, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Knowledge and Christian Belief,* unrevised. The book's first edition was published in 1966. A second edition appear in 1969.

To this third edition, Prof. Harvey appended a fresh introduction in which he candidly pointed out the weaknesses of his book and sketched out the changes needed if its basic thesis was to continue to be serviceable. Amidst these self-criticisms, he waxes autobiographical, explaining his own religious and intellectual journey from fundamentalist Calvinism to the position defended in his book.

I've excerpted these autobiographical remarks below so you can get some sense of the impact Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* (a 1921 commentary on Paul's New Testament letter) had on a generation or three of American as well as German theologians. Some have even called the decades between 1920 and 1960 the Barthian captivity of Protestant theology.

It is not difficult to discern echoes of Nietzsche as well as Kierkegaard in Harvey's brief characterization of Barth's/Paul's message. I ask that you read the few pages below before turning to the assigned primary sources.

BWS

The Historian and the Believer

The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief

Van A. Harvey

With a New Introduction by the Author

University of Illinois Press
Urbana and Chicago

There were those who knew me at the time who were quite aware that playing off the Enlightenment's morality of judgment against Christian belief was not the happiest way of characterizing what I was doing. They knew that I was really working out the theological conflicts that were emotionally rooted in my upbringing.

To explain how this is so, permit me some autobiographical reflections. I was raised in the manse of a Presbyterian and Calvinist minister who bore the label "fundamentalist" as a badge of honor, unlike those fundamentalists who began to call themselves "evangelicals" after the embarrassment of the Scopes trials. Presbyterian Calvinism, as George M. Marsden has pointed out, is a distinctive form of fundamentalism. Rooted in the Westminister Confession and the Scottish philosophy of common sense, it "consider[s] truth adequately supported only when it [is] based on the exact apprehensions of intellect, and not on indefinable feelings."[2] It holds that genuine religious experience only grows out of right ideas, and right ideas, in turn, can only be expressed in words and propositions. God, it is believed, provided both the words and their proper propositional form in Scripture, which is inspired and without error. The Fundamentals, those five propositions the denial of which constitutes fundamental error, are simply a schematic defense against the most serious modernist heresies.

Among the truths to which my father believed Scripture bears witness is double predestination or, to use the more precise formulation, supralapsarianism: the doctrine that even before the fall of Adam, God ordained some to salvation and others to damnation. For those Christians who cannot accept this austere form of the doctrine of election and who compromise with infralapsarianism (after the Fall, God elected some to be saved but had no active will toward the others), my father used a locution similar to that once used by Cardinal Newman to characterize his intellectual enemies: they lack the courage of an inference. For those who argue that God is nothing but grace, as Karl Barth would do in his later writings, my father would point to Scripture as a clear refutation of this universalism. For him, damnation was the logical corollary of salvation.

In my youth, I identified with my father. He seemed to me to be both a learned man and a minister of extraordinary integrity. He read the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek; he wrote a doctoral dissertation aimed at refuting the theory of evolution; and he would from time to time deliver entire series of sermons on the archaeology of the Bible or the alleged conflicts between it and science. Occasionally he would flail away at what he regarded as the insupportable arguments of biblical critics. He relished exposing what he thought were the obvious errors of "free willists," the mushy-mindedness of "enthusiasts," and especially the sentimentalism of "modernists" who did not understand the appalling evil of which human beings are capable and which he believed could only be explained by the doctrine of original sin. I was interested in these arguments from as early as I can remember, and my father plied me with books supporting his position. The title of one that I consulted religiously, *Halley's Bible Handbook,* will be instantly recognized by any fundamentalist who, improbably, chances to read this introduction.

Not until high school did I begin to be troubled by an ambivalence toward this faith. On the one hand, I regarded the substance of my father's piety to be profound; on the other hand, I found its doctrinal form—its literalism—to be vaguely embarrassing. I felt this faith to be profound because the Calvinist believes that everything in history and nature is the manifestation of an inscrutable will and, hence, sees the problem of life to be an acceptance of the course of all things. Faith, so to speak, is being able to say yes to all of existence. It is what Jonathan Edwards has called "consent to being." This acquiescence does not come easy to anyone, religious or otherwise, but especially not to the Calvinist who is so keenly aware of the suffering and injustice in life. I was especially moved, then, when, called to my father's death bed, he summoned his strength to say: "Son, when you are facing death there is only one prayer worth praying. 'The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord.'"

On the other hand, I was discomfited at the way in which this profound faith seemed to be constricted by its literalistic and rationalist doctrinal form. The form not only required an intellectually convoluted apologetics but seemed incommensurate with the basic confidence of faith itself. The faith that a benign will is behind all events should banish anxiety and defensiveness, but the fundamentalism I knew was driven by an intellectual paranoia that saw doctrinal enemies everywhere: Arminians, infant baptists, papists, evolutionists, modernists of all kinds, and, especially, biblical critics. At an age in which most children in America derived their villains from the movies and comic strips, my world was populated with higher critics, Arminians, infralapsarians, modernists, and pre-, post-, and a-millenialists.

As a result, I inherited an intellectual resistance to all new and unfamiliar philosophical, religious, and scientific ideas, which I later discovered (to my comfort) also characterized the experience of Paul Tillich:

> I was able to reach intellectual and moral autonomy only after a severe struggle. My father's authority, which was both personal and intellectual and which, because of his position in the church, I identified with the religious authority of revelation, made every attempt at autonomous thinking an act of religious daring and connected criticism of authority with a sense of guilt. . . . As a result, every theological, ethical, and political criticism encountered inner obstacles that were overcome only after lengthy struggles.[3]

Despite my growing ambivalence, I still associated with evangelical Christians when I went to college—some of them were founders of the Campus Crusade for Christ—although I was never welcomed into their inner circle because I continually expressed reservations about this or that Christian doctrine they considered essential (for example, the blood atonement). Moreover, I was increasingly troubled by the haunting thought that what I found profound in Christian faith might only be contingently related to those supernatural beliefs about Jesus to which most people cling. Indeed, the thought occurred to me that perhaps the masses of ordinary people could only cling to this deeper faith if it were embedded in "magic, mystery, and authority," as is suggested by Dostoyevski's Grand Inquisitor. This thought had, in fact, already occurred to me while I was in the navy in World War II. I can still remember one night on a destroyer in the South Pacific typing out a paper in which I tried to refute this idea, which I only later found articulated in *The Brothers Karamazov.*

The religious anxiety arising from the thought that the Grand Inquisitor might be correct was deepened by two courses I took during my senior year in college. The first was a course on biblical criticism in which I heard arguments that were far more sophisticated and persuasive than anything allegedly refuted in *Halley's Bible Handbook.* For the first time it occurred to me that biblical criticism posed serious philosophical and theological problems for orthodox Christian faith. The second course was a seminar in American philosophy in which George Santayana's work was required reading. Santayana argued, in effect, that Christianity was a type of metaphysical poetry, and I can recall telling a Christian friend that this view was far more dangerous than atheism because it surrendered the notion that historical beliefs were fundamental to faith.

Upon graduation from college, I felt obliged to give the Christian church one good opportunity to present me with its best case before I entered a secular profession—music was one of those beck-

oning. Surely there would be professors, I thought, who could show me how the profundity of faith might be preserved in an acceptable intellectual form. So I applied for admission to Princeton Theological Seminary with the explicit agreement with the administration that I was only seeking greater understanding and did not intend to be ordained for the ministry. The student body at that time was divided acrimoniously between fundamentalists and liberals, and the attendant controversies unfortunately dictated the pedagogy of those professors teaching the first-year classes. Since the professors gingerly tiptoed around all the controversial issues raised by biblical criticism, I decided after two quarters to leave the seminary and study the philosophy of religion at Yale. But before leaving I departed from the required first-year curriculum and took two advanced courses with Paul Lehmann, one of which required that I write a paper on Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans.* At first I was utterly perplexed by the book. Then suddenly its message struck me like the thunderbolt that had hit German theology thirty years earlier. I still regard it as one of the great theological books of all time.

In *Romans* I found an interpretation of Paul's theology that contained the same profound understanding of faith that had so impressed me in my home but that was now free from the naïve, rationalist form that had constrained and marred it. Barth explicated Paul's letter as if it were written for twentieth-century readers. This contemporary Paul argued that only when we recognize the incompleteness, triviality, anxiety, and transitoriness of life can we even begin to understand the message of the gospel—a gospel that does not have to do with the salutary effects of religious belief or experience but with the "qualitative distinction" between God and the world,[4] which is to say, with the "fact" that human beings live in an ambiguous and transitory world surrounded by an unfathomable mystery that they are always trying to understand and domesticate.

Religion, Barth claimed, is the primary human means of that domestication. By ingeniously translating "law" as "religion," he was able to claim in Paul's name that even as we cannot be justified by the law so we cannot be justified by religion, by orthodoxy. Indeed, since sin is the attempt to abrogate the distance between time and eternity, and since religion (law) is the human embodiment of

this attempt, it follows that religion is the principal locus of sin. And it is in religion that human beings attempt to deny and conceal the ambiguity of their existence.

Revelation, in this view, is not the abolition of the ambiguity of life; nor is it the communication of propositions that, when believed, are saving truths. It is, rather, the full disclosure of this ambiguity, this chasm between time and eternity. Revelation is what Barth termed "the *Krisis*" (judgment), in which all human pretensions are called into question: "Genuine faith is a void, an obeisance before that which we can never be, or do, or possess."[5] Faith, according to Barth, is knowing that one does not know.[6]

Barth's treatment of Jesus as this *Krisis* was particularly startling to me, for what Jesus revealed is simply what the law and the prophets also revealed—namely, the pretensions of human pride and the unknowability of God. If one asks, as Paul rhetorically did, What advantage then is the law and religion? the answer is that religion forces human beings to see that they cannot complete existence for themselves. Religion keeps alive the question of whether there is any meaning in life. Jesus is not to be regarded as some supernatural event that visibly disrupts the causal nexus. He is not a religious genius, a new law giver, an inspired prophet, or a superman. His significance does not lie in his ethics or his teaching. It lies, rather, in his identification with human despair and his giving up all claims to be a religious hero or genius.

> Jesus stands among sinners as a sinner; He sets Himself wholly under the judgment under which the world is set; He takes His place where God can be present only in questioning about Him; . . . He moves to the cross and to death; His greatest achievement is a negative achievement. He is not a genius, endowed with manifest or even with occult powers; He is not a hero or leader of men; He is neither poet nor thinker:—*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* Nevertheless, precisely in this negation, He is the fulfillment of every possibility of human progress, as the Prophets and the Law conceive of progress . . . because He sacrifices to the incomparably Greater . . . every human heroic or aesthetic or psychic possibility, because there is no conceivable human possibility of which He did not rid Himself.[7]

Barth did not interpret the Resurrection as a supernatural reversal of a tragic course of events, one event among other events, but as the symbol for the nonhistorical relation of the whole life of Jesus to God.[8] Faith in the Resurrection, then, does not consist in believing in events that are dubious by our normal canons of reasoning. Rather, it is the identification with the crucified One, which is to say, it is embracing the ambiguity of existence with him. Consequently, Christian historians do not have to lay aside their normal canons of reasoning when contemplating the Resurrection; they need not invoke "mystery" when discussing it. According to Barth, "if the Resurrection be brought within the context of history, it must share in its obscurity and error and essential questionableness."[9] So too the love of God is not a particular form of behavior within the sphere of human competence. Rather, "men love God, whatever their visible behavior may be, when, veritably and existentially, quite clearly and once for all, without possibility of avoidance or escape, they encounter the question: 'Who then am I?' For the contrasted and inevitable 'Thou' involved in this question is—God."[10]

Barth's *Romans* reclaimed Christian theology for me, but not until I studied for several years at Yale with H. R. Niebuhr did I see the fuller implications of this position for the problems surrounding the relationship of faith to biblical criticism. In Niebuhr's classes I was introduced to the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and Paul Tillich, among others; in these classes I also made two friends, Jim Gustafson and Gordon Kaufman, who, like me, were deeply impressed with Niebuhr and with whom I was able to discuss endlessly and vigorously the implications of his position. These were heady times for all of us because we came to see that for Niebuhr, as for Bultmann, Gogarten, and Tillich, faith was something deeper than assent to historical or doctrinal propositions; indeed, faith was compatible with radical intellectual doubt. Faith, Niebuhr used to say, is the ability to trust in "the Void," by which he meant that "last shadowy and vague reality, the secret of existence by virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away" and against which there is no defense.[11] To have faith is to have confidence in this last reality in which we move and

have our being. It is to be able to say, "Though it slay us yet will we trust it." Niebuhr called this "radical monotheism."

Because radical monotheism accepts the relativity of everything finite and sees the absolutization of anything human as idolatry, it regards even its own theological articulations as relative and provisional. Consequently, it opens the way to knowledge and inquiry, removing the taboos surrounding our intellectual life. It deprives all human claims of absolute significance. "So long as we try to maintain faith in the gods," Niebuhr wrote, "we fear to examine them too closely lest their relativity in goodness and power become evident, as when Bible worshipers fear Biblical criticism."[12]

Indeed, one might go further and say that faith demands secular knowledge just as it requires works, because knowledge and action are the ways in which human beings take responsibility for their world. We might even argue that what humans believe is itself a work, one for which we are then responsible. Believing responsibly is like behaving responsibly. And since one is no more saved by believing correctly than by acting ethically, one should not put any religious confidence in this work/belief. Faith enables human beings to be free to take responsibility for their world. This is why radical faith and the Enlightenment are not antitheses if by the Enlightenment we mean what Immanual Kant meant by it, namely, "Have courage to use your own reason!"[13]

Niebuhr was more concerned with the epistemic implications of this radical view of faith than most of the other dialectical theologians, although he never worked them out in a rigorous philosophical fashion. Gordon Kaufman used to argue that it was the task of our generation to do this, to think through the implications of historical relativism for Christian faith. By relativism Niebuhr meant the discovery of our cultural and historical relativity. We are, he liked to point out, social beings whose intelligence and reasoning are conditioned by sensation, interest, and feeling. Our categories are limited and do not copy the way things really are. We always think and inquire from some point of view, some perspective that, in turn, is grounded in our societies and cultures. Our reason is not a universal reason but is qualified by our culture. We are, Niebuhr

wrote, "historical selves whose metaphysics, logic, ethics, and theology, like [our] economics, politics and rhetoric are limited, moving and changing in time."[14]

This synthesis of Niebuhr's radical monotheism and the historicity of human existence constitutes the perspective from which *The Historian and the Believer* was written, although this perspective, unfortunately, did not sufficiently inform it. I wanted to show that a proper understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith can liberate Christians from anxiety about biblical criticism because faith does not require them first to adopt some supernatural worldview before they can make sense of certain historical claims. Faith gives persons the intellectual freedom to work out their beliefs responsibly. Our beliefs, to use the biblical term, are works. Consequently, we do not need to be defensive about science, evolutionary theory, or biblical criticism. In fact, to make historical claims on faith makes responsible and rigorous historical inquiry impossible. Moreover, when we do this, we raise suspicions in the minds of those whom we are trying to convince because these people are aware of the falsifying influence of belief on inquiry, as at least one theologian, Martin Kähler, has clearly recognized.[15] Had I put the issue in this fashion, rather than as a conflict between the Enlightenment's will to truth and the Christian's will to believe, I might not have pleased orthodox theologians any more than I did, but at least I might not have been so easily read as a rationalist or dismissed, as in one case, as a positivist.[16]

NOTES

1. See John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992). Cf. E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Press, 1993).
2. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 112.
3. Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 36–37. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was also in revolt against his pietistic past, put his feelings slightly differently: "My late awakened spirit, remembering how long it bore an alien yoke, fears ever lest it be subjected again to the domination of some alien opinion, and whenever a strange object discloses a new aspect of life, my first step is to rise in arms against it, in order to fight for freedom and not to fall back at every new experience into the slavery in which my education began" (*Schleiermacher's Soliloguies,* trans. and ed. Horace Leland Friess [Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1957], pp. 40–41).
4. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans,* trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 39.
5. Ibid., p. 88.
6. Ibid., p. 202.
7. Ibid., p. 97.
8. Ibid., p. 195.
9. Ibid., p. 204.
10. Ibid., pp. 318–19.
11. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 122.
12. Ibid., p. 125.

13. Immanuel Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy,* trans. and ed. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 286.
14. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 9.
15. See the discussion of Martin Kähler in chapter IV.
16. See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority,* vol. 1: *God Who Speaks and Shows: Preliminary Considerations* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1976), p. 42.
17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty,* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 21e.
18. Ibid., p. 29e.
19. Ibid., pp. 35e–38e.
20. Ibid., p. 44e.
21. This is the point Bultmann was making in his famous but heavily criticized remark, "We cannot use electric lights and radios . . . and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament" (*New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings,* trans. and ed. Schubert M. Ogden [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], p. 4).
22. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* ed. G. H. von Wright with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 32e.
23. See the discussion in chapter III.
24. F. H. Bradley, *Collected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 1:25.
25. Erwin Reisner has argued that the acceptance of revelation requires one to surrender everything that belongs to the godless world, including "the whole superstition that calls itself science, above all historical science" (quoted by Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith,* trans. James Leitch [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963], p. 18).
26. See Malcolm L. Diamond, "Erikson's Young Man Luther: The Protestant Response," *Religious Studies Review* 10 (April 1984): 128–34.
27. Michael A. Arbib and Mary B. Hesse, *The Construction of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 8.
28. See chapter VII.
29. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* p. 32e.
30. Ibid.