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Unity and Diversity in Evangelical Theology

by Robert K. Johnston

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Other chapters from the same book are included in Religion-Online, by Bloesch, Dayton, Dryness, Fackre, Packer, Pinnock, Spittler, Weber, Wells and Yoder. Other works by Johnston include *The Christian at Play*, Eerdmans, 1983; *Psalms for God's People*, Regal, 1982; and *Evangelicals at an Impasse: Biblical Authority in Practice*, John Knox Press, 1979.

SUMMARY

This essay is the introduction to the nine documents which follow, all derived from Johnston (ed.), **The Uses of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options**. Evangelicals are increasingly recognizing the need to ask methodological questions as they do theology. This growing hermeneutical concern is not a capitulation to modernity, but rather is evidence of evangelicalism's continuing commitment to the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.

Evangelicals are increasingly recognizing the need to ask methodological questions as they do theology. This is not a capitulation to modernity as a few continue to charge. Rather our growing hermeneutical concern is evidence of evangelicalism's continuing commitment to the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture. How can we better understand and explicate our faith? This is the rightful question evangelicals are beginning to address. It is not enough merely to exegete a text, although some traditionally have stopped here. Nor is it enough to repeat the theology of Luther, Calvin, or Warfield, although some continue to confuse Scofield and the Scriptures he annotated. Theology is neither simply "Bible" nor "tradition." What it is and how to do it, however, are more difficult to define.

Ninian Smart sticks close to the etymology of the word "theology" in his definition: "Doing theology, in the proper sense, is articulating a faith." (1) Granted, but how is this to be accomplished? In his book, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (1975), David Kelsey provides a helpful starting point by demonstrating that Christian theology is always tied to the biblical text in some way. (2) This is true of all Christian theology, whether conservative or liberal. Kelsey, himself a liberal in theological orientation, chronicles how seven leading theologians have used the Bible in their theology. All see the Bible as in some sense authoritative, but each views it in a different light. For Warfield, the content is inspired; for Bartsch, it is distinctive. For Wright, Scripture's narrative shows God to be dynamic, while for Barth, it makes an agent (Jesus Christ) alive and present. For Thornton, Scripture's expressiveness is as image; for Tillich, it is as symbol; and for Bultmann, it is as myth. In each of the three final cases Scripture's expressiveness both gives the past its occurrence and occasions present reality. Kelsey comments, given the multiple use of Scripture to authorize a theological proposal, we must conclude that Scripture is only indirectly the authorizing agent. The real validation comes from the worshiping community. That is, Scripture's authority according to Kelsey must be viewed functionally as flowing from the body of believers. Scripture is what the church accepts as definitive for its faith and life.

Evangelical Theology's Unity

Such a proposal, however provocative, flies in the face of evangelicalism's

commitment to the intrinsic authority of the Bible in all that it affirms. It is increasingly difficult to provide an inclusive definition of evangelicalism (Donald Dayton's article is helpful in pointing out the variety). Even Billy Graham has been quoted as saying, "Evangelicalism is a great mosaic God is building, but if you asked me to, I'd have a hard time giving you a definition of what it is today."⁽³⁾ This is the same Graham about whom Martin Marty writes, evangelicals can be defined as "people who find Billy Graham or his viewpoints acceptable."⁽⁴⁾

Evangelicalism is "a river that doesn't have its banks very well defined," comments Robert Schuller.⁽⁵⁾ Yet, although the banks might be ill-defined, the central theological channel can still be straightforwardly articulated. Evangelicals are those who identify with the orthodox faith of the Reformers in their answers to Christianity's two fundamental questions: (1) How is it possible for a sinner to be saved and to be reconciled to his or her Creator and God? (the answer: *solus Christus; sola gratia; solafide*); (2) By what authority do I believe what I believe and teach what I teach? (The answer: *sola scriptura*).⁽⁶⁾ Evangelicals, that is, have a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and a commitment to the Bible as our sole and binding authority.

Evangelical theologians, thus, distinguish themselves from other theologians within the Christian community by accepting as axiomatic the Bible's inherent authority. Opinions abound concerning the role of tradition vis-a-vis Scripture. A variety of answers are given concerning the contribution of the theologian's context in his or her theological formulations. Some evangelicals stress the experiential dimensions of the Christian faith and see these as central to the theological enterprise. But within this diversity there is a centeredness. To use a phrase which became a benchmark for theology within my own denomination-the Evangelical Covenant Church-there is a commitment to ask the question: where is it written?

In the following collection of essays this biblical focus is clear. Gabriel Fackre writes, "Tradition is *ministerial* and Scripture is *magisterial*." Clark Pinnock similarly "would want to distinguish between a ministerial and a magisterial role for science in theology, just as for reason in theology." He goes on to define evangelicalism's theological center, saying, "Adherence to the Bible for me means acquiescence to all its teachings and a refusal to allow any rival to stand

above it, whether tradition, reason, culture, science, or opinion." J. I. Packer argues for "the permanent binding force of all biblical teaching," and, to give a final example, John Yoder echoes this same sentiment, The Bible will serve . . . as the total value frame in which priorities need to be determined."

Evangelical Theology's Diversity

Given evangelicalism's common theological center with regard to Scripture, it is surprising to some when evangelical theology's diversity in approach and perspective is highlighted. Some, in fact, confuse this plurality in method with Kelsey's functionalism, but this is to misunderstand the diversity's common underlying perspective. The collection of essays which follows, written by leading evangelical theologians, demonstrates convincingly the breadth of evangelicalism's umbrella. It is large in its stretch but not without its limits.

Thus, in the collection of essays J. I. Packer argues that the "*biblical texts must be understood in their human context*" while Donald Bloesch's christological hermeneutic emphasizes the need to go beyond the literal sense of the text to discern its larger significance. Theology must show forth Christ. Russell Spittler, on the other hand, argues for an exegetical theology. Only through a commitment to Scripture does he find validation for his tradition. For Clark Pinnock theology must be hermeneutical theology. The current tendency to relate theology to present-day issues is a "recipe for Scripture-twisting on a grand scale." Only what is revelation, i.e., only Scripture, can "be made a matter of theological truth."

David Wells argues for theology's twin tasks of "decoding" (of discovering what God has said in and through Scripture) and of "encoding" (of clothing that conceptuality in fabric native to our own age). William Dryness argues alternatively that to do theology properly "we must begin not with a doctrine of Scripture but with our life in the world." "Scripture will function much more like a musical score than a blueprint for our lives. A score gives guidance but it must always be played afresh." Here is a contextual hermeneutic that is two-directional.

For John Howard Yoder theology is an activity on behalf of the church. Its function is neither that of maintenance nor that of generalization, however. Theology is the

church's servant through a missionary and aggressive "biblical realism." Theology protects against overly confident or overly relevant applications. It is meant to correct and renew the church.

For Robert Webber theology is an activity from out of the church's tradition. The standard for judging a theology's adequacy is not Scripture alone, for the thoughtful working out of much of theology took place in the centuries following the writing of Scripture. This is not to put church practice on a par with Scripture. It is only to recognize that the apostolic tradition did not fully emerge until the fourth and fifth centuries and, thus, it is the Church Fathers whom we must study if we are to theologize aright.

Finally, Gabriel Fackre argues for a "full-orbed approach" to theology. In this approach the world, the church, Scripture, and the gospel core all have their function.

From this survey which could be broadened still further to include evangelicals as diverse as Carl Henry (a philosophical rationalist) and Bernard Ramm (a Barthian), Paul Mickey (a process theologian), and James Olthius (a Dooyeweerdian), it should be apparent that there is no one evangelical theological methodology. Bloesch's christological focus can be contrasted with Spittler's exegetical theology. Packer's canonical interpretation provides something of a bridge, but it is still a third perspective on biblical interpretation. Wells' contextualization as application can be contrasted with Dyrness' contextualization as two-way dialogue between Scripture and world. And Dyrness in turn finds himself critiqued by Pinnock's hermeneutical theology. Yoder's theology for the church is rooted in present biblical realism; Dayton's, in a recovery of Wesleyan truth. Webber's church theology, on the other hand, is grounded in the developing dogma of the Fathers. Finally, Fackre would argue for an eclectic approach to the theological task, finding the gospel core to be theology's ultimate focus.

Just as evangelical social ethics spreads across a wide spectrum from Jerry Falwell to Mark Hatfield, from Jimmy Carter to Carl Henry, so evangelical theologians demonstrate a cross section of hermeneutical approaches. Those who interact with evangelical theologians will not encounter simply a conservative, theological monolith based in philosophical rationalism. Such a

philosophical approach is but one of many options.

Evangelical Theology's Continuing Questions

Having recognized both the diversity and the commonality of evangelical theological hermeneutics-that is, both its freedom and its rootedness-it will be helpful to readers of this collection of essays if we return to ask with greater care concerning the nature of evangelical theology's diversity. What issues are surfacing? Where is the present ferment? Five questions can be isolated as being of particular current interest.

What Is the Role of Our Present Context in the Shaping of Our Theology?

Robert McAfee Brown, a mainline Presbyterian theologian, relates how he was brought up short by a Latin American colleague who asked him at a conference, "Why is it . . . that when you talk about our position you call it 'Latin American Theology' but when you talk about your position you simply call it 'theology?'"(7) Such a question could rightfully be addressed to traditional evangelicalism. Most of us have assumed ours to be the normative position, "that we stand at the point where the true understanding of Christian faith is located, and that others indulge in interesting cultural or geographical deviants from our norm."(8) Writing in 1977, Harvie Conn of Westminster Theological Seminary bemoaned this "Evangelical failure of awareness of our cultural boundness." He spoke of a typical "Evangelical thinness of treatment" regarding our cultural rootedness.(9)

Yet, "the times, they are a-changing." Evangelicals are increasingly becoming involved in contextual theology. This is not without its debate, however. The growing difference within evangelicalism regarding contextualization is described helpfully by David Wells in his essay: "In the one understanding of contextualization, the revelatory trajectory moves only from authoritative Word into contemporary culture; in the other, the trajectory moves both from text to context and from context to text. . . ." Increasingly, evangelicals are opting for the second of these models-an "interactionist" approach, to use William Dymess' terminology. Mission strategists and Third World evangelicals like Charles Kraft, Rene Padilla, and Harvie Conn are arguing strongly for a hermeneutical

circulations.(10) Without capitulating to "humanistic patterns overlaid on the Scripture," theologians must reformulate Christian truth "in terms of new conceptual frameworks" and these new "conceptual frameworks themselves must be reformulated in terms of the Scripture."(11) Here is one approach to evangelical contextualization, a hermeneutical circulation.

Others, such as Clark Pinnock, are suspicious of such two-way conversation, believing Scripture's authority to be compromised in the process. David Wells similarly would argue for a contextualization in regards to application, but not with reference to one's basic understanding of doctrine. One might say that, for him, contextualization is what changes doctrine into theology. Doctrine, however, is pre-contextual.

Is a fully developed contextualization the opportunity to hear Scripture speak again with clarity and conviction, or is it the abdication of a commitment to biblical authority? If the danger is syncretism, on the one hand, the danger is a complacency, on the other hand, toward God's particular address. Harvie Conn writes:

... the fear often is expressed that the "rather amorphous middle position termed 'evangelicalism, living between a left wing capitulation to ethnology-sociology and a right wing reaction to the same disciplines, "seems more ready to expend their time and energy in defense of older formulations of Christian truths than to grapple with the matter of reformulating these truths in terms of new conceptual frameworks." ... the alternative fear ... [is] that the growing interest in what some have labelled ethno-theology or "contextual theology" (as opposed to systematic theology) may be done without sufficient attention to a biblically critical analysis of the systems of anthropology and sociology and appropriated by the evangelical..(12)

Common human experience and Christian fact must both be reflected on theologically. How these two "sources" for theological reflection are to be in correlation so as to preserve the integrity of each remains the question.

What Role Can Tradition Play in Theological Formation?

In his inaugural lecture at Union Theological Seminary in New York 1980),

Methodist Geoffrey Wainwright argued that any theology not substantially congruous with the Christian tradition was unprofitable to the church. He recalled that, in his first inaugural lecture at a seminary in Cameroon, he, an Englishman, had argued for the "Africanization of Christian worship." Now, he saw an opposite need as a newcomer to America-the "theologization of America." Wainwright pleaded, "We should be seeking to bring the churches and Christians of this country to a deeper awareness of the riches of the great Tradition."(13)

Increasing numbers in evangelical circles are agreeing with Wainwright. An important evidence of this fact was the Chicago Call, an appeal by forty-five evangelicals which was issued in May 1977. The Call read in part:

We confess that we have often lost the fullness of our Christian heritage, too readily assuming that the Scriptures and the Spirit make us independent of the past. In so doing, we have become theologically shallow, spiritually weak, blind to the work of God in others and married to our cultures.(14)

The signers went on to argue:

We dare not move beyond the biblical limits of the Gospel; but we cannot be fully evangelical without recognizing our need to learn from other times and movements concerning the whole meaning of that Gospel.(15)

For too long the evangelical church has operated from out of a theological parochialism, sometimes arrogant and always debilitating. Typically, evangelicals have viewed creeds and systems as of limited usefulness, valuable at best as road maps for the faith but unnecessary if you knew the way. Because it was possible for Christians (to say nothing of non-Christians) to misread Scripture, the church was right in developing a "mere Christianity" to aid readers.(16) However, in another sense there needed to be "no creed but the Bible." As long as it seemed that uniformity of biblical interpretation would prevail, Scripture seemed a sufficient guide.

Such an assessment is now receiving a challenging critique from within evangelicalism. At the extreme end of the evangelical spectrum are those like Michael O'Laughlin of the Evangelical Orthodox Church. He writes: "The Gospel

cannot be fully comprehended outside of the timeless Church.... Standing within the tradition of the Church is necessary to properly interpret Scripture."(17)

Others, like Robert Webber, also argue for the necessary role of tradition, even if their language is more moderate. Webber writes: "In the first place evangelicals should recognize that a doctrine of inerrancy is not a sufficient basis for authority ... evangelicals should recognize that the key to interpreting Scripture is the 'rule of faith.'"(18)

Not all agree with such assessments, however. Although understandable, "the longing for a tradition that will make sense out of our evangelical tower of Babel, the recoil from self serving exegesis, and the dissatisfaction with the miserable and stultifying parochialism of much evangelicalism" should not cause us to opt for an authoritative creed (and an authoritative church resting behind the creed). (19) For which creed is to be chosen, and why? Or which Church Fathers are to be thought correct? Peter Abelard once illustrated the diversity of viewpoints among the early Fathers by citing one hundred and fifty examples in which they widely disagreed. Among the myriad of creeds and confessions that have been written, there simply is no univocal testimony.(20)

Can one really understand the "rule of faith" (standardized in the Apostles' Creed) as a "canon within the canon," or is all tradition rather (to use the words of James Dunn) a "*canon outside the canon*"?(21) How can tradition be used ministerially while Scripture remains magisterial? That is, can one place confidence in the positions of the Church Fathers, or Calvin, or Wesley, and still avoid placing tradition on the same level as Scripture? Such are the questions awaiting further discussion.

Are There Limits to the Critical Study of the Bible?

James Dunn, an English evangelical, in his article, "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," asserts there is evangelical unity regarding the Bible's inspiration and authority. "Where Evangelicals begin to disagree," he writes, "is over the implications and corollaries of these basic affirmations. . .What does the assertion of the Bible's inspiration require us to, affirm about the continuing authority of any particular word or passage of Scripture?" He asks where an evangelical "line of defense" should be pitched. Dunn argues that the line should

not be drawn too restrictively, always allowing for the "intention" of the text. Otherwise, the authority of Scripture will prove to be "more abused than defended."(22)

It is clear to even the most casual observer that a commitment to biblical authority is not in itself a sufficient guarantee of biblical faithfulness. Adequate biblical interpretation is demanded. The Jehovah Witnesses are "Arian"; Victor Paul Wierwille's The Way International has a "dynamic monarchianism"; and Herbert W Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God is binitarian. Yet all three are "inerrantists," as Robert Price points out. All hold to a strict, high view of Scripture. (23) What must be said is that some biblical interpretation is in error. But which? And by what criteria do you evaluate the various claims? Clark Pinnock centers the issue even more pointedly as he asks, "How is it that those who take a high view of the Scriptures are known to produce less by way of creative biblical interpretation than those who either bracket the question or treat the text as a human document?" Unfortunately, evangelicals have more often defended Scripture than expounded it. We have been preoccupied with its divine side and neglected its human dimension.

Fine and good. Many evangelicals have learned the lesson of the need to interpret. Over the last thirty-five years we have been challenged to engage in serious criticism and we have entered in. But are there critical limits? The following essays suggest two, though each is not without its evangelical skeptics. There is no uniform answer as of yet concerning the scope of the critical enterprise.

First, we must not set Scripture against Scripture in a way that doses off part of the canonical witness. Theologians like James Packer and Clark Pinnock are correct in arguing that the Bible must be read as a whole, coherent organism, for it is not only human words but also God's Word. Such an approach would reject any relativization of Old Testament Scripture. It would also reject those who would set Paul at irreconcilable odds with James or one of the Gospel writers. As Pinnock argues, "The doctrine of inspiration [authority?] implies belief in the coherence, if not tight uniformity, of Scripture and commits us to the quest for canonical wholeness." But where does diversity leave off and disunity begin with regard to interpretations? What qualifies as "coherence" remains the question. What

constitutes contradiction?

Secondly, Scripture's intrinsic divine authority suggests the correlative qualification of human thought. For this reason *Sachkritik* ("content criticism") remains a problematic critical approach as does deconstructionism. Both set the interpreter's judgment over Scripture rather than understanding it as in the service of Scripture. Again a host of questions intrudes. Some evangelicals are asking: how can the historical character of biblical language be maintained if Scripture's intrinsic authority is asserted? Others, like James Dunn or Paul Jewett, see contradictions in the text that demand the arbitration of human reason. To qualify reason risks stultifying theology. Not to do so risks revelational abandonment. The interplay between human reason and divine revelation is complex; the limits to the critical study of Scripture are not easily defined.

Is There a Central Biblical Message or Schema That Can Control Our Theologizing?

Karl Barth, in his 1939 report to the readers of *The Christian Century* on "How My Mind Has Changed," wrote the following concerning his theological pilgrimage during the 1930s: "In these years I had to learn that Christian doctrine, if it is to merit its name and if it is to build up the Christian church in the world as she must needs be built up, has to be exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Jesus Christ-of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God spoken to us men." (24) Thirteen years later Barth stated his position even more radically: "At the risk of more headshaking and displeasure I will at any rate venture to whisper one thing to you, namely, that I have become increasingly a Zinzendorfan to the extent that in the New Testament only the one central figure as such has begun to occupy me - or each and everything else only in the light and under the sign of this central figure." (25)

Barth is perhaps the best known contemporary theologian to develop a program of "christological concentration." But others, both evangelical and non-evangelical in orientation, have adopted similar methodologies. In his book, *Confessions of a Conservative Evangelical*, Jack Rogers makes clear both the distinction between two levels of approach to the Bible and his own preference: "The first level is the central saving message of the gospel. . . . Around that saving center lies a vast

body of supporting material that is often complex, difficult to interpret, and subject to a variety of understandings.(26) Rogers, in emphasizing the first level, is consistent with his theological mentor, G. C. Berkouwer, who wrote: "Every word about the God-breathed character of Scripture is meaningless if Holy Scripture is not understood as the witness concerning Christ. . . . It is only regarding this centrality that it is legitimate to speak of the unity of Holy Scripture."(27) Such a christocentric model of interpretation also characterizes the approach of Donald Bloesch in this volume. He argues for the "need to go beyond authorial motivation to theological relation," i.e., to the Jesus Christ of sacred history who is our ultimate norm in faith and conduct.

A christocentric theological model is a means of both overcoming theological diversity and centering biblical teaching. Ecumenical dialogue becomes possible around the common confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord." So too does meaningful interaction with modern society. For a concentration on christology allows the theologian to escape becoming bound to a bygone world-view or a particular societal perspective. Even more importantly, a christocentrism allows one to concentrate on the Bible at its actual center (there is no "other foundation . . . than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" [I Cor. 3: 11] .) In doing so, it helps preserve the theologian from indulging in false comfort to a world that knows neither "certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain."(28)

Yet there are questions which a christic approach must face. Is the biblical text not itself a statement of truth, or is it only a pointer to some more central message? If it is a pointer, how does one avoid a subjectivism in the application of such a *sensus plenior* to Scripture? That is, what criterion for judgment is used in discovering Christ as the central message of each of the Bible's books? Why, for example, should we continue to spiritualize the Song of Songs? How is the authority of the text-of all the biblical text-maintained?

This question is particularly pressing with regard to the "antilegomena" (the "disputed books" of the canon).(29) Why should Jude be retained and the Didache rejected if a christological norm is imposed? And what of Esther? Bloesch argues that it is the Spirit acting within Scripture that gives us the theological significance of the biblical text, not what historical or literary criticism can tell us. But does the Spirit operate apart from the Word or even in addition to it? How can this move

from Word to Spirit be carried out, so that there is neither friction nor reduction in the theological core? Such a question remains a pressing concern for evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike.

How Should the Role of the Spirit Be Understood in Theology?

The contributors to this volume tend to subsume the role of the Spirit under one of the other headings-Scripture, tradition, christology, and the present context. Representatively, Russell Spittler, the one Pentecostal contributor, develops his exegetical theology with only a concluding reference to the need to "link subjective piety with scientific (historic) objectivity." Spittler recognizes that "exegesis puts one in the vestibule of truth; the Holy Spirit opens the inner door." Nevertheless, objective biblical scholarship helpfully aided by tradition remains his focus, and the Holy Spirit is only indirectly and in conclusion mentioned as a contributor to evangelical theology.

Somewhat analogously, David Wells makes reference to Luther's delineation that the "three factors indispensable to the construction of 'right theology' are *oratio*, *meditatio*, and *tentatio*." *Oratio* (prayer) and *meditatio* (reflection on Scripture) are matters in which we engage. Thus, Wells discusses these in detail. *Tentatio*, however, is the work of God; it is "something which occurs to us and, for that reason," he concludes, "I wish to say little about it."

Donald Bloesch, on the other hand, gives the Holy Spirit a more explicit discussion, seeing the theologians task as discovering not only "the intent of the author but also the way in which the Spirit uses this text to reveal the saving work of Jesus Christ." J. I. Packer argues similarly, as does Gabriel Fackre when he writes

Because there is an Author of this Book who works in, with, and under the authors of these books, neither source nor substance comes home until the truth of the affirmations met here convicts and converts.... Thus a double subjectivity is bound up with the soteric use of Scripture: God the subject by the power of the Holy Spirit present in the believer's subjectivity of encounter. When this happens ... the doctrine of grace becomes a cry of exultation.

Fackre's comments are suggestive as they link theology to doxology-to praise

of God given his presence among us.(30) Here is an area for further exploration by evangelical theologians.

But is this the extent of possible discussion concerning the role of the Holy Spirit in theological hermeneutics? Additional help comes from the German evangelical Helmut Thielicke. In his three-volume systematic theology, *The Evangelical Faith*, Thielicke begins with the work of the Holy Spirit.(31) It is the Spirit who grants accessibility to revelation affecting the miracle of divine self-disclosure, of participation in God's self knowledge. Ontologically, God's being in himself takes precedence. But, noetically, we must begin with the actual encounter with God through his Spirit.

Both "modern" and "conservative" theologies are dismissed as Cartesian by Thielicke. That is, their focus on the human subject, whether as one who feels or as one who reasons, ends up subjecting the kerygma to an *outside criterion*. Christians must be pointed away from themselves and toward salvation history. They must be oriented to Christ by having his past actualized and made present to us. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, creating men and women anew, as they are incorporated into the salvation event. Such an approach does not ignore the human context, but sees it through the Spirit as the object of a retrospective glance.(32)

Where Spittler, Wells, Packer, Fackre, and Bloesch all moved from Word to Spirit in their hermeneutical discussions, Thielicke has instead written from the perspective of the Spirit. It is from out of one's real knowledge of God through the Spirit that propositions about God and God's Word must be formulated. But how this is to be done, that is, how Christian theology is to move from Spirit to Word without friction or reduction, is not fully resolved by Thielicke. Thielicke's personal truth is presentational; it is to be told in narrative form. In this sense Thielicke is similar to Fackre. What remains unclear is how Christian proclamation and doctrine are to flow out of and interpret this truth. The question remains: how should the role of the Spirit be understood as foundational for theology? Or can it be?

Concluding Remarks

Theology's sources are multiple as the above questions would indicate. John

Wesley understood theology's resources to be Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. In an earlier book I argued for these being Scripture, tradition, and world. I wrote, "Theology is the translation of Christian truth into contemporary idiom with an eye toward Biblical foundations, traditional formulations, and contemporary judgments.(33) In their book on *Protestant Christianity*, Claude Welch and John Dillenberger describe "the development of theology" as always being "a dual movement, an expression of the inner life of the community of faith as it acknowledges the presence of God in Jesus Christ, and at the same time a partial reflection of the contemporary world."(34) Donald Bloesch speaks of the need for a "catholic Evangelicalism," by which he means a theology that is grounded in the Word and open to the full range of Christian voices through the ages.(35)

Jack Rogers has argued in his survey of theology at the beginning of the 1980s:

I am personally committed to the development of what I would call a *confessional centrist theology*. Such a theology would be evangelical in that it would be committed to the authority of Scripture as the model for theological judgments as well as the model for living a Christian life in faith. @s theology would be committed to the centrality of Jesus Christ as the saving and transforming presence of God in human history. It would seek to remain in that central Christian tradition represented by the census among confessional statements of various Christian groups down through the ages.... It is important that a contemporary confessional centrist theology be open to the research data and the methods of analysis provided by the social and natural sciences.(36)

Such descriptions of theology's resources can be multiplied endlessly. The questions remain: How are these various components of Christian thought to be combined? And what are their interrelationships?

In the following essays it is Gabriel Fackre's "full-orbed" theology that provides perhaps the most provocative description of theology's interrelationships. Whether or not one ultimately accepts all the details of his description, he nevertheless shows what is at stake in seeking "to honor the contribution of a variety of constituencies..." For Fackre, the *setting* which grants perspective to one's theology is the world. It is our cultural analysis, contemporary experiences,

and rational explorations that raise the formative questions and perceptions. Within this context the church, through its tradition, whether living or ancient, provides an invaluable *resource*. The church, moreover, focuses us inward, pointing us to the Bible-to Scripture and its narrative as our theological source.

The substance of the biblical record is the gospel story and its *final standard*, Jesus Christ himself, both as he speaks through his Spirit providing *illumination* and as he provides an objective norm against which to judge all truth in light of his full, historical self-disclosure. Thus there is theologically, according to Fackre, a movement from the wider culture through the Christian tradition to the biblical record with its definitive good news of Jesus Christ as revealed through his Spirit.

Such an ordering has consistency and force. others will argue with it, desiring the role of tradition to be enhanced, or a christocentric concentration within biblical interpretation, or desiring the Holy Spirit to provide our theological entry point. Whatever the delineation, however, the question remains: how are we to move reasonably between our present context, the widest possible Christian tradition, and an authoritative Scripture, while allowing the Spirit to witness definitively to Jesus Christ as savior and Lord? It is such a question that each of the following essays addresses. For it is just such a question that describes the challenge of the theological task for evangelicals today.

Notes

1. Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 6-7.
2. David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).
3. Billy Graham, quoted in Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Split-up Evangelicals," *Newsweek*, 99 (April 26, 1982) 89.
4. Martin Marty, quoted in *ibid.*

5. Robert Schuller, quoted in *ibid.*
6. John R. W. Stott, "The Evangelical View -of Authority," *Bulletin of Wheaton College*, 45 (February 1968) 1.
7. Robert McAfee Brown, "Theology in a New Key," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 33, No. 1 (Fall 1977), 24.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Harvie M. Conn, "Contextualization: Where Do We Begin?" in *Evangelicals and Liberation*, ed. Carl E. Armerding (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pp. 97-98.
10. Cf. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); C. Rene Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture-A Theological Perspective," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 63-78; Harvie M. Conn, "Contextualization."
11. Conn, "Contextualization," P. 101; Charles H. Kraft, quoted in Conn, "Contextualization," P. 100.
12. Conn, "Contextualization," P. 100.
13. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Towards God," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 36, supplementary issue (1981), 21.
14. "The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals," in *The Orthodox Evangelicals: Who They Are and What They Are Saying*, ed. Robert E. Webber and Donald Bloesch (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), P. 12.
15. *Ibid.*
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