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Evangelicals and the Enlightenment
Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism

by Bernard Ramm

I had just finished a lecture on my version of American evangelical theology. When I was asked by a shrewd listener to define American evangelical theology more precisely, I experienced inward panic. Like a drowning man who sees parts of his life pass before him at great speed (an experience I have had), so my theology passed before my eyes. I saw my theology as a series of doctrines picked up here and there, like a rag-tag collection. To stutter out a reply to that question was one of the most difficult things I have ever had to do on a public platform.

The experience set me to reflection. Why was my theology in the shape it was? The answer that kept coming back again and again was that theologically I was the product of the orthodox-liberal debate that has gone on for a century. It is a debate that has warped evangelical theology. The controversial doctrines have been given far more importance than they deserve in a good theological system. Other important doctrines have been neglected. The result of that debate has been to shape evangelical theology into the form of haphazardly related doctrines. I did not have a theology whose methodology was scientifically ascertained, nor doctrines scientifically interrelated or properly defended. That is why I could not give a reasonable account of my theology when asked to do so.

Encountering the Enlightenment

In my reading it became more and more apparent that one of the great cultural watersheds of the history of human culture was the Enlightenment. One cannot explain the great Schleiermacher, for example, without first explaining the Enlightenment. One cannot explain the modern mind at all without spending much time in the eighteenth-century developments, the century of the Enlightenment. It finally became apparent to me that the place to begin my quest was with the investigation of the Enlightenment.

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Historian Henry E. May has written that only Christians are still worried about the Enlightenment. That is right: The Enlightenment sent shock waves through Christian theology as nothing did before or after. Theology has never been the same since the Enlightenment. And therefore each and every theology, evangelical included, must assess its relationship to the Enlightenment.

In my reading on the Enlightenment, I found out that I had to correct a view of the history of theology that I had previously held. I thought that orthodoxy, with its view of theology and Scripture, had prevailed until the time of Friedrich Schleiermacher. I thought it was Schleiermacher and the various versions of liberal Christianity after him that had upset Protestant orthodox theology. On the contrary, I found out that it was the Neologians or Innovators who had accomplished this in the eighteenth century (for example, Johann Michaelis, Johann Jerusalem, Johann Döderlein, Johann Semler, Johann Spalding, and Jacob Baumgarten). These men are unknown in the United States except to specialists in the history of theology, and that is why I had never encountered them before. It was either the Neologian Karl Bahrdt or Johann Semler who first used the expression "liberal theology."

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sion "liberal theology."

The Neologians, in their work in biblical criticism, upset the orthodox doctrine of inspiration as set out in the seventeenth century. They made a concerted attack on orthodoxy in general and on Lutheran orthodoxy in particular. They made a strong, systematic protest against the supernatural in historic Christianity. And they attacked such particular doctrines as eternal judgment, the existence of the devil, the Trinity, the vicarious atonement, the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Christ, Chalcedonian Christology, and Lutheran Christology.

This is why the Enlightenment began to worry me, and why it ought to worry all evangelical theologians.

It is generally agreed that the founder of liberal Christianity was Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who has also been called the greatest theologian between Calvin and Barth. It is therefore important to inspect his thought and see how he reacted to the Enlightenment.

Schleiermacher began his education among the Moravians. They were noted for their Pietism in their spiritual life, but as far as they were concerned with theology they were very close to traditional Lutheran theology. While Schleiermacher was studying under the Moravians at Bardy, he encountered the Neologians of the Enlightenment and was deeply impressed by them. He found himself in such disagreement with the theological emphases of the Moravians that he left their school at Bardy and transferred to the University of Halle, which had Neologians on its faculty. Barth claims that Schleiermacher accepted the Neologians' criticism of orthodox Lutheran dogma.

Let us look more closely at Schleiermacher, the Enlightenment, Christianity, and his new synthesis. First of all, Schleiermacher agrees with the Enlightenment criticism of orthodoxy. That version of Christianity has run its course. Modern learning makes it an impossible option. On the other hand, the religion of the Enlightenment period is also to be criticized. The theology of deism and the religious philosophy of Kant both distorted the nature of true religion. They made too easy an identification of morality with religion. Schleiermacher is a romantic, and therefore he defends a romantic interpretation of religion and Christianity and so forms the grand new synthesis we call liberal Christianity.

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This is precisely how Paul Tillich sets out the theology of Schleiermacher (*A History of Christian Thought* and *Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theology*). He sees Schleiermacher and Hegel faced with the same problem: how can we be modern and Christian at the same time? The answer was to go beyond the rationalism and deism of the Enlightenment to the new synthesis of modern learning, modern philosophy, and the reinterpretation of historic Christian dogma. In passing, Tillich says that this is his way, too, for it is the only viable option for the twentieth century.

If the Enlightenment collapsed orthodoxy as an option for Europe's intelligentsia; and if liberal Christianity was born as a reaction to the Enlightenment, it seems obvious to me that evangelical theology must come to terms with the Enlightenment.

Encountering Karl Barth

I must now pick up another thread in my theological trek. In the middle of the 1940s, I chanced on a copy of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. At that time Volume I/1 was the only volume in English. On the one hand, the volume frustrated me. It contained so many untranslated citations in Latin and Greek—so unrealistic for American readers. It contained long technical sections in fine print. And I was confused by the novel meanings given to traditional theological concepts. On the other hand, I sensed that something important was being said. It was certainly not a rehash of older liberal theology. And it was strangely different from the standard orthodox authors I had read.

When the chance came for me to study in Europe for an academic year, there was no question in my mind but that the place to go was Basel, where Barth was still alive and teaching. That was the year 1957–58. The inspiration had finally come to me that of all the contemporary theologians the one who was doing the best job of relating historic Reformed theology to the Enlightenment was Karl Barth. Hence my quest for a viable evangelical theology, my sense of the importance of the Enlightenment for theology, and the theology of Karl Barth intersected in this thought: Barth's theology is a restatement of Reformed theology written in the aftermath of the Enlightenment but not capitulating to it.

His program had the following elements:

1. He denied that the criticism of historic Christian orthodoxy by the Neologians was valid.
2. He accepted all the genuine positive gains of the Enlightenment as they have been upheld by modern learning.
3. He rewrote his historic Christian Reformed theology in the light of the Enlightenment.

This is essentially a dualistic approach to the Enlightenment: Barth is both a child and a critic of the Enlightenment. The combination makes his program very difficult to get into focus. Barth disagrees with Schleiermacher, for he feels the latter had capitulated to the Enlightenment with reference to the substance of the Christian faith. Barth agrees with Schleiermacher in that Christian theology can be written only in the aftermath of the Enlightenment.

Barth is a child of the Enlightenment wherever it represents true learning and genuine progress in knowledge. He is a severe critic of the Enlightenment in its pretensions to final truth and perfect harmony with reason, and of its criticism of orthodox Christianity. He lets the proud waves of the Enlightenment roll, but he marks a clear, firm line where they must stop.

Because Barth is both a child and a critic of the Enlightenment, fundamentalists cannot understand him. To agree with all the essential gains of the Enlightenment appears to fundamentalist mentality as already having given up the faith. Barth criss-crosses all the lines of their theological grid, so rather than attempt to really understand him they write him off as an odd version of neomodernism. Evangelical scholars are either puzzled or impatient. They are puzzled because he seems to be mixing oil and water. Or they are impatient with him because he doesn't say things that seem precisely evangelical.

We can illustrate Barth's duality as follows: As a child of the Enlightenment, he recognizes the development and legitimacy of modern scientific history; yet he defends the substantial truth of the resurrection narratives. As a child of the Enlightenment, he knows that we live in a scientific culture and enjoy its technological fruit (which he so lavishly praised after a number of serious medical problems); yet he scolds the scientists when they convert their science into a world view. As a child of the Enlightenment, he does not challenge the rights of biblical criticism; but he is a sharp critic of, and a dissenter from, much modern biblical criticism. To picture Barth as only a child of the Enlightenment and therefore as nothing more than a clever neomodernist clearly distorts Barth's theology. It is equally a distortion of Barth's theology to write it off as a ponderous effort to rehabilitate old orthodox theology. Barth's dual reaction to the Enlightenment makes it difficult to get him into focus. This difficulty is as common among nonevangelical theologians as among evangelicals and fundamentalists. It takes much reading and soaking in Barth's theology in order to more clearly see his methodology emerge.

One of Barth's most attentive students and admirers in the English-speaking world is Thomas F. Torrance. In his book *Theological Science*, Torrance makes the following comment about Barth's theology, showing that Torrance sees the nature of Barth's theology similar to the thesis I am advocating: "The theology of Karl Barth is to be understood as a rethinking and restating of Reformed theology after the immense philosophical and scientific developments of modern times which have supplied us with new conceptual and scientific tools."

Barth is not alone in attempting to come to terms with the Enlightenment and modern knowledge and yet not surrender the substance of

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the Christian faith. In my opinion, Helmut Thielicke is doing the exact same thing in his volumes on *The Evangelical Faith* and in his smaller work, *How Modern Must Theology Be?* He is unhappy with Schleiermacher and Bultmann because in their effort to be modern they have lost the historic faith of the church. He is equally unhappy with the orthodox and fundamentalists who ignore the current cultural context in which theology must be written. He urges a program in theology that is anchored both to the great acts of God as recorded in the New Testament and to the modern world of concepts, problems, and dilemmas.

A long list could be made of theologians with programs similar to Barth's, such as Thomas F. Torrance, Emil Brunner, Thomas Oden, Hendrikus Berkhof, Paul Holmer, Werner Elert, Heinrich Vogel, Gerrit C. Berkouwer, Donald Bloesh, Helmut Gollwitzer, and Otto Weber. Certainly one of the reasons that people such as C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, T. S. Eliot, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield still have a sustained hearing is that they never force educated people to choose between evangelical faith and learning. And certainly not all these theologians relate their theology to the Enlightenment in the same way Barth does. But in my opinion Barth's method of coming to terms with modern learning and historical Reformed theology is the most consistent paradigm for evangelical theology.

Barth vs. Liberalism and Fundamentalism

Barth's resolution of the problem that the Enlightenment posed for Christian theology is so radical that theologians of other traditions have difficulty interacting with his solution. All those theologians who in principle agree with the manner in which Schleiermacher correlated Christian theology with modern learning reject Barth's correlation even though they may admire his theological genius. This difficulty was transparently clear in the Karl Barth Colloquium held in 1970 at the Union Theological Seminary. Most participants were unrepentant children of the Enlightenment, and one can read very clearly between the lines that they were plainly confused in how to assess an apparent theological genius. They could identify neither their own unlimited allegiance to the Enlightenment nor the dualistic approach of Barth.

Barth's divergence from the marriage of Enlightenment and Christian theology comes out clearest in his conflict with Bultmann. Bultmann believed that the world picture of (1) the New Testament and (2) modern humanity were in radical contradiction. This belief is exactly the verdict of the Enlightenment. Barth replied that modern gadgets, modern technology, and modern scientific theories have nothing to do with the great acts of redemption accomplished in Jesus Christ. The bodily resurrection of Christ, for example, is independent from any world view. Barth stoutly defended the bodily resurrection of Christ, and those who doubt it ought to read his own words on the subject (*CD* III/2, p. 442).

Although Barth did not capitulate to the Enlightenment, neither did he ignore it. Therefore he has never been on happy terms with the fundamentalists. It might be presumed that the fundamentalists would rejoice that the greatest theologian of the century defended some of their doctrines. Furthermore, one might think that they would have high regard for the most sustained criticism of religious liberalism in modern literature, given in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. It also should have encouraged them to know that the fifteen principles of liberal theology condemned by the fundamentalists would also be condemned by Barth. On the contrary, the fundamentalists accepted Van Til's thesis that Barth's theology, for all its historical theological vocabulary, is nothing more than neomodernism. In fact, Barth's theology is more dangerous than neomodernism, for its use of orthodox terminology disguises the poison in the pot.

Barth in turn could not tolerate the obscurantism, antiintellectualism, and Pietism of the fundamentalists. Part of the blame may be on Barth's side, for he uniformly mixed with the professional theologians and the theologians of the ecumenical movement. I am sure Barth was as unhappy with the fundamentalists as he was with the theologians of liberal Christianity for their lack of real interaction with historical theology. In his programmatic remarks in *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, Barth insists that evangelical theology respect the history of the community as expressed in its creeds and theology. If the church began at Pentecost, then it did not really begin with the advent of liberal Christianity or fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a regrettably unhistorical movement with reference to its understanding of theological history.

In his book, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, Gregory Bolich shows how ambiguous a reception Barth has had among evangelicals. He outlines more than a dozen varying responses among evangelicals to Barth's theology, ranging from extreme suspicion and hostility to sincere admiration. One reason for evangelical hostility toward Barth's theology has been that Brunner's important theological monographs were translated into English long before Barth's *Church Dogmatics* (the systematic translation of which did not begin until 1956). Brunner makes more concessions to the Enlightenment than does Barth. He accepts much more radical biblical criticism and makes abrasive criticisms of fundamentalism. In linking the names of Barth and Brunner, evangelicals presumed that there was no significant differences in their theologies.

Furthermore, Cornelius van Til's book on Barth and Brunner, *The New Modernism*, was published in 1946. It proposed the thesis that neoorthodoxy was really neomodernism. For many evangelicals, this book became the official evangelical interpretation of neoorthodoxy, and for many it remains so even now. Hence Barth had a bad press among evangelicals long before his *Church Dogmatics* was translated volume by volume into English. In the writings of such popular evangelicals as Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer, the bad press given Barth continues.

The nonevangelical evaluation of Barth has not been too credible, either. From the papers and comments of the Karl Barth Colloquium, one would never know that Barth believed in the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the incarnation, an objective atonement, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. In the question periods at the end of Barth's public appearances in America, the questions were rarely such as to enable the orthodox side of Barth's theology to emerge. Apart from a touch of humor here and there, one would never gather from the questions and comments that Barth had thoroughly repudiated the theological program of liberal Christianity.

The bad press given Barth continues in the writings of such popular evangelicals as Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer.

When theologians who are full children of the Enlightenment ignore the strong orthodox elements in Barth's theology, to that same degree they distort Barth's theology. Or, worse yet, Barth is turned into a speculative or philosophical theologian, a role Barth utterly abhorred. Or else non-evangelical theologians neutralize Barth's more orthodox theological concepts by patronizing them by listing them among possible options in current theological discussion. At best Barth is treated as an eccentric theological genius who has had flashes of theological insight worthy of attention.

And the non-evangelicals are just as guilty as the evangelicals in listing Barth with Tillich, Niebuhr, and Bultmann, as if Barth's theology again were only a stone's throw from theirs. The evangelicals fall off one end of the log in interpreting Barth, and the non-evangelicals fall off the other end.

Toward A New Evangelical Paradigm

The critical issue is whether evangelical theology needs a new paradigm in theology or not. If an evangelical feels that the Enlightenment and modern learning have ushered in a new cultural epoch, which in turn has precipitated a new and radical set of issues for evangelical

theology, then such a person will feel the need of a new paradigm. If an evangelical feels that the Enlightenment is but one more chapter in the history of unbelief, then he or she will not feel that a new paradigm is necessary.

In a word, Barth is not for everyone. Persistent critics of Barth, such as Van Til, Clark, Henry, and Schaeffer, apparently feel that the older paradigm of evangelical theology still holds. But if one feels that the Enlightenment *did* precipitate a crisis in evangelical theology, then one is ready to read of another option, be it Barth's or some other theologian's, such as Thielicke.

Of course, I believe that such a crisis in evangelical theology *has* occurred. Accordingly, those evangelicals who stay with the older methods must gloss over the problems raised by the Enlightenment, which opens them up to the charge of obscurantism. But the difficult, sticky, mean, hard, tough problems raised by the Enlightenment and modern learning, in my opinion, cannot be glossed over.

Evangelicals cannot ignore the fact that modern scientific history arose out of the Enlightenment and was made more precise in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it embarrassed the nature of biblical history. In *Historiography Secular and Religious*, Gordon Clark reviews the problems connected with historiography but glosses over the impact of scientific history on the history of the Old Testament, the Synoptic Gospels, and the Book of Acts.

Evangelicals cannot gloss over all that the modern sciences say of the origin of the universe, the origin of life, and the origin of man. Francis Schaeffer stoutly defends his view of these matters in *Genesis in Space and Time*, but he glosses over the enormous amount of scientific information that bears on those topics.

Evangelicals cannot gloss over the monumental amount of critical materials developed by modern biblical scholarship. In *God, Revelation and Authority*, Carl Henry sets out his views of revelation, inspiration, and authority against all other options, but his monumental effort (five volumes so far) stumbles because he glosses over biblical criticism.

Some evangelicals have come to better terms with the Enlightenment than have others. 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 paradigm is necessary.

The difficult, sticky, mean, hard, tough problems raised by the Enlightenment and modern learning cannot be glossed over.

This need is evident in the fact that so much evangelical scholarship is piggy-backing on non-evangelical scholarship. It does not have an authentic scholarship of its own. But Barth's paradigm has resulted in an authentic methodology. This is why he has received such a worldwide hearing even among those who do not accept his paradigm.

What, then, did I learn from research in the Enlightenment, the history of evangelical theology, and the theology of Karl Barth? I learned that to capitulate to the Enlightenment as liberal theology did is to betray the Christian faith. I learned that to ignore the Enlightenment and gloss over the problems it raised is to engage in obscurantism. Furthermore, I learned that obscurantism is a losing strategy in the modern world.

I learned that, among all the options for correlating modern learning with the Enlightenment, the best is the theology of Karl Barth. I view such men as Berkouwer and Thielicke as offering other possible options. I learned, as others before me have, that we study Barth not to become Barthians but to learn new ways to maintain the old faith.

One may be a five-point Calvinist, a five-point Arminian, or a seven-point dispensationalist and still learn to write theology from the paradigm of Barth. I am sure that it is not always possible to draw a clear distinction between Barth's methodology and his conclusions. But at least it is worth the effort. In appropriating Barth's paradigm, we do not need to defend Barth at every point. It may be that the best service of Barth to evangelical theology is not to give us a theology but to open windows to the fact that there are other alternatives to evangelical theology than the options that emerged in the nineteenth century.

PROCLAMATION EVANGELISM:
A PRACTICAL FIELD SEMINAR FOR SEMINARIANS

This week-long seminary course is a strategic part of a larger beach evangelism project which is sponsored each March by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The course is offered for academic credit through the Florida Theological Center of Westminster Theological Seminary. Students' participation in the project will be supplemented in the seminary track by reflection on such issues as audience analysis, theological translation of gospel jargon, and the transferability of beach evangelism strategy and skills for use in other settings. The seminar is available either of two weeks: March 20–26 or March 27–April 2, 1983. Further information can be obtained from Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, 233 Langdon, Madison, WI 53703 or from Dr. James Hurley, Director of Studies, Florida Theological Center, 2150 SW 8th St., Miami, FL 33135.

NORTH AMERICAN NETWORK OF THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

During the summer of 1983 there will be an ecumenical student conference in conjunction with the World Council of Churches' Sixth Assembly in Vancouver, British Columbia. Although there is no official connection between the WCC and the student gathering, participants will be able to learn from church leaders who are in the area for those meetings. This is the first major event organized by the North American Network of Theological Students in an attempt to start an ecumenical network of seminarians. The conference aims to provide an ecumenical environment for reflection on North American theology and theological education, to expose North American theological students to the global Church, and to stimulate continuing ecumenical activity among theological students. The conference will be held in two sessions, July 23–30 and July 30–August 6, 1983. For more information about the conference or about opportunities to participate in organizing it, write Tim Anderson, NANTS Coordinator, 5555 S. Woodlawn Ave., Chicago, IL 60637.

BREAD FOR THE WORLD

Bread for the World, a national Christian citizens' movement, is seeking individuals to participate in the 1983 Summer Organizing Project from June 8 through August 17. Individuals will participate in a ten-day orientation in Washington, D.C., on current anti-hunger legislation, how government works, public speaking and group organizing skills. Each will then be placed in a particular part of the country to work with a local BFW group for eight weeks in organizing Christians to be involved in public policies on hunger. Follow-up and evaluation in Washington conclude the project. For more information contact Sharon Pauling, intern coordinator, Bread for the World, 6411 Chillum Place, N.W., Washington, DC 20021; (202) 722-4100.

THE CHURCH & PEACEMAKING IN THE NUCLEAR AGE:
A CONFERENCE ON BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

This conference, to be held May 25–28, 1983 in Pasadena, California, will provide the first opportunity for a large representative group of evangelical Church leaders to meet to address the nuclear arms race. The unique emphasis of this national conference is its balanced educational approach. Many responses to the issue will be presented by leading evangelical voices of different Christian traditions. An unprecedented coalition of over fifty evangelical organizations, including Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, has initiated this Church-wide event. An additional thirty groups are contributing to the diversity of the conference by providing in excess of one hundred practical and technical workshops to some two thousand participants on a first come/first served basis. In America, many churches have taken an active role in the nuclear arms discussion. Until now, however, evangelical participation has been minimal. This conference could prove to be a major watershed in evangelical thought regarding faith issues raised by the nuclear weapons buildup. For more information contact Jim Brenneman, The Church and Peacemaking in the Nuclear Age, 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, CA 91104.