

WITH WHAT IS EVANGELICALISM TO
PENETRATE THE WORLD?
A STUDY OF CARL HENRY'S ENVISIONED
EVANGELICALISM

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The death of Carl F. H. Henry¹ (1913-2003) at the age of ninety on December 7, 2003, in Watertown, Wisconsin, marked the close of an era in the history of modern American evangelicalism.² The consistent challenge issued in Henry's writings is to evangelicals to penetrate into the world to bring about social change. But despite the encouraging reports of the success of evangelicalism in terms of numerical growth and gained public respectability, to a certain extent there have been internal disunities and cultural accommodation within the movement. The splendor of "The Year of the Evangelical" in 1976 did not last long.³

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¹Converted to Christ as a newspaperman in 1933, Henry was the early literary editor of *United Evangelical Action* of the National Association of Evangelicals, a co-founder of and lecturer at Fuller Theological Seminary (1947-1956), the first editor of *Christianity Today* (1956-1968), and the author of the monumental six-volume *God, Revelation, and Authority*. Biographical information of Henry can be found in Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian: An Autobiography* (Waco: Word, 1986); Richard A. Purdy, "Carl F. H. Henry," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 260-75; John D. Woodbridge, "Carl F. H. Henry: Spokesperson for American Evangelicalism," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry* (ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 378-93; T. George, "Henry, Carl F. H.," in *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (ed. Timothy Larsen; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 297-300. For a brief overview of Henry's early efforts for Christian social ethics, see Augustus Cerillo Jr. and Murray W. Dempster, "Carl F. H. Henry's Early Apologetic for an Evangelical Social Ethic, 1942-1956," *JETS* 34 (1991): 265-79.

²For an overview of the history of fundamentalism and evangelicalism, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982); idem, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); idem, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism Embattling and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1998); Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). For a fundamentalist perspective, see David O. Beale, *In Pursuit of Purity: American Fundamentalism Since 1850* (Greenville, S.C.: Unusual Publications), 1986.

³See the cover story of *Newsweek* on October 25, 1976.

The contrast between a flourishing evangelicalism and its ineffectiveness in cultural renewal has been an intriguing research topic for church historians and social scientists such as George Marsden, Mark Noll, and Christian Smith, to name a few. Various possible factors have been proposed to explain this contrast. These include an attitudinal change towards certain lifestyle issues, the lack of a broad institutional church base, adjustment to a shifting cultural climate, and the inadequacy of "personal influence strategy" and "voluntaristic absolutism."⁴ Whereas the above analyses in one way or the other have shed some light on the relation of evangelicalism and its socio-cultural milieu, the perspective of the pioneers of the movement has not been taken seriously.

As one of the first to challenge evangelicals of the twentieth century to rethink the proper relation of Christianity and society, Henry's thoughts are certainly worth revisiting. It is unfortunate that many evangelicals of a younger generation do not know much of his vision which sparked the new evangelical movement leading to the resuscitation of modern American evangelicalism. With this in mind, the present essay has two purposes. The first is historical and descriptive. I will survey Henry's rationale of Christian social concern, his several key tactics for social transformation, and his assessment of the evangelical failure to impact the nation. As will be seen, Henry believed that the absence of a comprehensive Christian world-life view, which could penetrate into the world, was a prime factor undergirding the social ineffectiveness of evangelicalism. Second, I want to discuss a few issues related to Henry's evangelical vision and examine the validity of some recent criticisms against his theological prolegomena. It is hoped that this study demonstrates the fruitfulness of interacting with the thoughts of past evangelical leaders, particularly that of Henry, who have played a great part in shaping contemporary evangelicalism.

I. CONTOURS OF HENRY'S ENVISIONED EVANGELICALISM

A. Henry's Rationale of Evangelical Social Consciousness

The driving force behind Henry's efforts for social ethics is biblical theology. "Hebrew-Christian thought, historically, has stood as a closely-knit world and life view. Metaphysics and ethics went everywhere together, in Biblical intent."⁵ Holding fast to a high view of Scripture, Henry believed that the revealed truths of God and his moral demand for justice were the fountainhead engendering the

⁴See n. 2; cf. James D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), esp. 59ff. For "personal influence strategy" and "voluntaristic absolutism," see Smith, *American Evangelicalism Embattling and Thriving*, 219.

⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 38. It was reprinted recently by Eerdmans in 2003. The page numbers referenced in this essay refer to the 1947 publication.

incentive of Christian social responsibility. Since Christians possessed a dual citizenship (this world and the world to come), they were obliged to fulfill their social duties in the present age.⁶ What Henry protested against in separatist fundamentalism was not any of its doctrinal assertions charted in *The Fundamentals* from 1909 to 1912. Instead, his criticisms were leveled at its "reductionist" theological system, within whose framework the bearings of the transformative power of the gospel on society were largely dissipated, owing to an overemphasis on the futuristic aspect of eschatology.⁷ A review of church history also shows the disaccord between the fundamentalist sectarian spirit and the unanimous social concern of historic Christianity and Reformed Protestantism.⁸ The Great Awakening and the revival movements in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not only effect spiritual conversion and personal holiness, but also had sweeping social influences as evinced by resulting prison reforms and the abolition of slavery.⁹ Criticizing the fundamentalist isolation from the world, Henry decried that for the first time in history, Christianity stood "divorced from the great social reform movements."¹⁰

Henry warned of two threats to the vitality and witness of the church if evangelicals remained lingering at the fringes of the public realm. One is the misrepresentation of Christianity in the eyes of non-evangelicals as socially impotent and countenancing injustices. A fundamental belief of evangelicalism, Henry asserted, was that God had revealed in Scripture timeless and fixed moral principles, which included his desire for justice and hatred of all evils. The other threat is the growing influence of non-evangelical groups and ungodly cultural forces, which eventually would jeopardize evangelicalism's very survival.¹¹ For Henry, to retreat from the social and political arenas was to hand over these domains to humanists and secularists, allowing them to define morality and justice for the world on their own terms.

⁶See Carl F. H. Henry, "The Resurgence of Evangelical Christianity," *Christianity Today* (30 March 1959): 6. Hereafter *Christianity Today* is abbreviated as CT; idem, "Christian Theology and Social Revolution (II)," *PSTJ* 21 (Winter-Spring 1967-68): 22; idem, "New Testament Ethics," in *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (ed. Carl F. H. Henry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 456-58; idem, "Communicating Biblical Social Concern to the Evangelical Community," *TJ* 4 (Spring 1975): 71-81.

⁷For Henry's attempt to balance the two-fold emphasis—already/not yet—in the kingdom teaching of Jesus, see *The Uneasy Conscience*, 47-58; Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), 9-29; also idem, "Reflections on the Kingdom of God," *JETS* 35 (1992): 39-49.

⁸Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 44.

⁹See Carl F. H. Henry, "Evangelicals in the Social Struggle," CT (8 October 1965): 3-4; idem, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 29.

¹⁰Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 36.

¹¹Carl F. H. Henry, "Evangelicals and Social Action," *United Evangelical Action* (1 March 1951): 7; idem, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 45; idem, "Evangelicals in the Social Struggle," 3.

But by what means were evangelicals to carry out this tremendous project of cultural penetration? We now turn to Henry's proposed strategies.

B. Four Evangelical Tactics to Transform the Society

The sweep of Henry's writings is so vast that I make no pretense of providing a comprehensive treatment. Instead, I restrict the discussion to four crucial aspects. While evangelism remained the primary strategy to effect long-lasting social change, what was key in Henry's evangelical vision was the promotion of Christian theism by expounding a scripturally-framed evangelical world-life view.

1. The Church as a New Society

For evangelicalism to exert Christian influence on the secular society, Henry believed that the role and function of the church had more to do than simply proclaiming the gospel or organizing evangelistic rallies. Amidst the unbelieving world whose social order had derailed from the track of God's will, the church, as a "new society" of the redeemed, was obliged to live out the transformative power of the gospel, to manifest justice framed by biblical theism, and to exemplify the genuine qualities reflecting "the realities of a new social order."¹²

The necessary step for the church to effectively bear witness for Jesus Christ in society was the formation of a comprehensive biblical world-life view, especially that in relation to personal and social ethics. Individual believers of the church, informed by Christian theistic presuppositions, should seek to live out a distinct "lifestyle" in their particular vocational circumstances.¹³ In line with Martin Luther's assertion on the priesthood of all believers, Henry affirmed "the biblical vision of the dedication and sanctification of work"¹⁴ in considering the secular workplace as the arena to which Christian men and women were called by God to be salt and light.

2. Penetrating Academia

Although nearly all the schools established in the American colonies bore the heritage of evangelical Christianity, Henry lamented that the scriptural world-life view along with its spiritual values and fixed ethical principles had been supplanted by relative

¹²Carl F. H. Henry, "Perspective for Social Action," *CT* (2 February 1959): 15. See also *idem*, *Faith at the Frontiers* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 116-17; *idem*, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 67.

¹³Henry, *Faith at the Frontiers*, 85. See also the chapter "The New Man and the New Society" in Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (6 vols.; Waco: Word, 1976-1983), 4:522-41.

¹⁴Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, 35. See particularly the chapter "The Christian View of Work" on pp. 31-71.

ethics and naturalistic presuppositions.¹⁵ But instead of restricting "the relevance of Christian confession to religion" alone,¹⁶ evangelicals must strive to penetrate the entire system of public education and to "contend for a new order,"¹⁷ spanning from grade school to the highest level of learning. Extensive literature written from the Christian perspective must be published so that the biblically theistic viewpoint could be presented in an intellectually respectable way to compete with predominant non-evangelical options.¹⁸

Turning to Christian education, Henry stressed the necessity of the education of the mind and the indispensable role of reason. Aware of the anti-intellectual climate within fundamentalism and the diminishing interest of evangelicals in theological inquiry and philosophical cognition, Henry consistently laid stress on the danger of such attitudes. Evangelical colleges and seminaries had an indeclinable intellectual mandate, which was the exposition of a Christian world-life view informed by divinely revealed truths.¹⁹ Henry had envisaged the establishment of a supradenominational Christian university, staffed with excellent faculty and equipped with the best resources and facilities to train the next generation to confront secular and non-evangelical thought with in-depth critical thinking.²⁰ This ambitious vision, however, was never realized.

3. *Penetrating the Political Square*

Having worked as a newspaperman for *The New York Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*, Henry was sensitive to the changing political climate and acute in making judgments about the social implications of legislative policies.²¹ Whereas the Bible provided no specific political model or policy, Henry stressed that it did offer "a theistic perspective" and some overarching, guiding principles as to the proper Christian relation with government.²² During the forties and

¹⁵Henry, "Christian Responsibility in Education," *CT* (27 May 1957): 11-14; idem, "Christian Education and Culture," *CT* 3 (10 November 1958): 3-6.

¹⁶Henry, "Christian Responsibility in Education," 13.

¹⁷Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience*, 70.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 70-71.

¹⁹More recently, see Carl F. H. Henry, "The Christian Pursuit of Higher Education," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (Fall 1997): 6-18.

²⁰Henry's envisaged institution, according to Kantzer, was a "utopia" university like that of the sixteenth-century Wittenberg or Geneva (see Kenneth S. Kantzer, "The Carl Henry That Might Have Been," *CT* [5 April 1993]: 15). It is worth mentioning that the idea of founding a Christian university did not come out suddenly in the sixties. Instead, it had been in discussion for over thirty years prior to 1967. See Carl F. H. Henry, "The Need for a Christian University," *CT* (17 February 1967): 6; cf. idem, "Evangelical Advance: Do We Need a Christian University?" *CT* (9 May 1960): 3-5.

²¹By the time Henry entered Wheaton College at age 22 (converted at age 20), he had already had about six years of journalistic experience.

²²Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society* (Portland: Multnomah, 1984), 133; also cf. idem, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, 77.

fifties, America was facing the threat of the modern totalitarianism sweeping through Europe as well as China, a political ideology of which the government's role was almost tantamount to that of an absolute monarch. But in the eyes of the public, the church's standpoint in cooperation with the government was ambiguous and ambivalent, owing to the diverse and conflicting positions of liberals, Roman Catholics, and fundamentalists.²³ In view of this, Henry believed that an urgent task for evangelicalism was to articulate and present the biblical perspective of law and civil government. Furthermore, since more or less all legislative issues and decisions entailed moral implications, evangelicals, in their assertion of revealed truths and moral absolutes, must not withdraw from the political square.

As an advocate for the separation of church and state, Henry insisted on the distinction between Christians fulfilling their public duty as citizens of the world and Christianizing the state for the service of the church.²⁴ On top of praying for the government and demonstrating civil obedience, evangelicals must above all seek to "expound the divinely disclosed purposes for which God ordains civil government."²⁵ In short, there were good reasons, besides that of evangelism alone (which was the fundamentalist incentive for social action), for Christians to be involved in politics.

4. Forming a Unified Evangelical Coalition

Throughout his years in the evangelical movement, Henry ardently endeavored to form a coalition for collaborating conservative efforts for evangelism and social action. In the mid-twentieth century, fundamentalists were in dissension among themselves over "secondary and tertiary points of prophetic detail" about eschatology,²⁶ while the modern liberals were actively promoting ecumenism within mainstream Protestantism.²⁷ Seeing the disarray in the conservative circle, Henry proposed an ecclesiastical ecumenism that would be truly "evangelical" in character. In his own words, what he pursued was "a convincing Bible ecumenism" within whose framework evangelicals could "act

²³See Henry's analysis in his "Evangelicals in the Social Struggle"; also idem, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, 82-88.

²⁴Henry, "Evangelicals in the Social Struggle," 7; Carl F. H. Henry, *Conversations With Carl Henry: Christianity For Today* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellon, 1986), 105-12; idem, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 98.

²⁵Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 101.

²⁶Carl F. H. Henry, "The Vigor of the New Evangelicalism," *Christian Life* (April 1948): 34. It is the third of the series published separately in January (pp. 30-32), March (pp. 35-38, 85), and April (pp. 32-35, 65).

²⁷For a nice summary of Henry's criticisms against the ecumenical movement, see Larry D. Sharp, "Carl Henry: Neo-Evangelical Theologian," (D. Min. diss., Vanderbilt University Divinity School, 1972), 133-37.

in unity around a core of accepted biblical essentials while being magnanimously tolerant of secondary differences."²⁸

As the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, Henry devoted extensive amounts of attention and energy in a number of editorial articles to foster evangelical unity that would effect the marshaling of resources and manpower for social reformation. The self-description of the newsmagazine, at its establishment in 1956, as transdenominational literature speaking in "a clear voice"²⁹ on behalf of evangelical Christianity revealed its self-consciousness as the evangelical thought journal. As time passed, *Christianity Today* moved away from its original vision, and the evangelical movement became so fractured that Henry's dream of mobilizing a conservative alliance seemed more and more distant. Yet, he remained convinced of the signal impact in society if such cohesion could be nurtured.

C. Henry's Assessment of Evangelicalism

We now examine the four major criticisms of the evangelical movement which surfaced frequently in Henry's later writings.

1. The Change of Fuller's Biblical Commitment

In 1947, Henry, Harold Ockenga, Charles Fuller, and several other conservative scholars launched the great project to establish at Pasadena, California, an evangelical seminary to "recapture the glory and academic standing of the old Princeton."³⁰ At its founding, Fuller was intended to be a center of theological education to build up the best evangelical scholarship and to train missionaries and pastors with "uncompromising academic and spiritual priorities."³¹ Its initial commitment to scriptural authority can be seen in the second article of the seminary's former ten-point statement of faith charted in 1950:

The books which form the canon of the Old and New Testaments as originally given are plenary inspired and free from all error in the whole and in the part. These books constitute the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice.³²

Fuller subtly modified its position and explicitly revised its statement of faith in 1962 to accommodate certain modern critical

²⁸Carl F. H. Henry, "Evangelicals: Out of the Closet but Going Nowhere," *CT* 24 (4 January 1980): 22; see also idem, *Faith at the Frontiers*, 99-101.

²⁹Editorial, "Why 'Christianity Today'?" *CT* (15 October 1956): 20. See also the analysis in Eric J. Miller, "Carl F. H. Henry and *Christianity Today*: Responding to the 'Crisis of the West,' 1956-1968," (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1994), 166 ff.; cf. idem, "Elusive Unity," *Touchstone* (April 2005): 12-15.

³⁰Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 24.

³¹Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 115.

³²Quoted from *ibid.*, 123-24.

views of the Bible. In a few occasions while commenting on the internal changes that happened in Fuller, Henry particularly noted Ockenga's seven-year non-resident, in absentia presidency as a chief factor of these changes.³³ In spite of his repeated promises to leave the pastorate at Park Street Church, Boston, Ockenga never made the move to California. This eventually led to a void at the highest administrative level, leaving it unable to steer the theological direction of the academy. The third president of Fuller, David A. Hubbard, with the support of Daniel Fuller, who had already embraced higher criticism during his study in Europe, further led the school away from the conservative wing. These changes gradually amounted to an internal tension within evangelicalism between the seminary and the movement that had brought it into existence. From Henry's standpoint, Fuller no longer functioned as a scripturally-based institution providing "a theology of culture and of society"³⁴ representative of evangelical convictions. In a broad sense, however, he still considered the school as a member of the evangelical community.³⁵

2. *The Lost Opportunity of Establishing a Christian University*

The miscarriage of the plan to found a national Christian university was, according to Henry, a grave mistake dramatizing the evangelical inadequacy to impact the collegiate world. Earlier we mentioned Henry's ambitious idea of establishing an evangelical institution of the highest academic excellence. Metropolitan New York City, with about twelve million inhabitants but no well-established Christian colleges, seemed to him like a strategic location for the envisaged university. In spite of the endorsement of Billy Graham, who also felt the need of such a school for the young converts of his evangelistic crusades, this proposal did not earn enough widespread support.³⁶ What Henry finally achieved was the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies in 1966, to sponsor scholarly research and writing. The net consequence of jettisoning the university plan, Henry said in his autobiography, was that "Today even churches in New York City struggle for effective memberships, and financial consultants counsel evangelical telecasters to avoid Manhattan as 'a graveyard for evangelism.'"³⁷

³³See Darrell Turner, "Carl Henry Critiques Evangelical Movement He Helped to Shape," *Christian Beacon* (20 February 1986): 3.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 365.

³⁶For Henry's comments on the causes leading to the collapse of the plan, see Carl F. H. Henry, "American Evangelicals in a Turning Time," *ChrCent* 97/35 (5 November 1980): 1060-61.

³⁷Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 383.

3. *The Shift of Christianity Today (CT)*

Henry's critique of CT was mainly leveled at its shift of direction from being a serious theological journal to a market-driven popular magazine. At its establishment in 1956, the original goal of the newsmagazine was to compete with the liberal *Christian Century* by presenting the conservative standpoint. Its target readership then was not so much evangelicals as non-evangelicals. But after Henry's resignation in 1968, CT gradually became more lay-oriented and drifted away from its initial goal of providing solid theological leadership for evangelicalism. Under the editorship of Harold Lindsell, the magazine turned inward and expended most of its energies to deal with "in-house" matters such as the inerrancy debate. The move of the headquarters in 1977 from Washington, D.C. (just one block from the White House),³⁸ to suburban Wheaton, Illinois, where a cluster of evangelical organizations and agencies were situated, further signaled a retreat of CT from the socio-political frontline. In a 1976 correspondence with Graham, Henry wrote,

Should the magazine be moved to the "evangelical heartland" to escape the temptations of Washington . . . it will not give symbolic notice I think that the original vision of penetrating the non-evangelical arena has not only suffered cumulative attrition, but that any vision is now wholly abandoned.³⁹

4. *The Fragmentation of Evangelicalism*

Fundamental to Henry's envisaged evangelical enterprise was the formation of a conservative coalition across denominational lines, whose members were willing to put aside secondary differences for a higher purpose, namely, the transformation of the world for Christ. At one time, the charismatic Billy Graham was Henry's candidate to rally an umbrella alliance of evangelicals. Writing to Graham, in 1970, Henry said, "You are the one man who can give the call. . . . [I]f you don't sound the call soon for a great evangelical conclave on unity, that day too may soon pass us by."⁴⁰ Because of the concern of losing ecumenical supports for his crusades, however, Graham was hesitant to perform that role. Entering the seventies, the fracture of the movement intensified due to disputes over a variety of issues. A major debate revolved around

³⁸According to the 1956 editorial footnote, the deliberate location reflected the self-awareness of the newsmagazine to function as "a symbol of the place of evangelical witness in the life of a republic" (see "The Evangelical Witness in a Modern Medium," CT [15 October 1956]: 21).

³⁹Carl Henry to Billy Graham, personal letter, 17 February 1970 (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Archives); cf. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 364.

⁴⁰Carl Henry to Billy Graham, personal letter, 23 November 1976 (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Archives).

“the battle for the Bible.” While holding fast to the doctrine of inerrancy, Henry believed that the way in which some conservative leaders handled the issue, such as accusing evangelicals who denied full scriptural authority as “false evangelicals,” had gone too far in damaging the unity of the community.⁴¹ Furthermore, the lack of mutually-agreed theological convictions around which evangelicals could come together led to an identity crisis. Even among evangelicals themselves there was hardly a consensus as to what the term “evangelical” really meant. Disappointed, Henry said, “failure of the evangelical colleges, seminaries, magazines and journals to articulate a comprehensive and definitive evangelical theology” had to account for this confusion.⁴²

D. Summary

With what is evangelicalism to penetrate the world? At the risk of oversimplification, Henry’s answer, I believe, would fall in line with the following statement: Evangelicals must relentlessly penetrate the world with a comprehensive, scripturally-based Christian world-life view to advance the biblical theism of evangelical Christianity. The above brief survey of the evangelical failure to fulfill its socio-cultural task suggests the absence of such a worldview as the leading cause of failure adequately to achieve this goal, at least from Henry’s perspective. The change of Fuller in its biblical commitment, the abandonment of the plan to establish an evangelical university, the retreat of *Christianity Today*, the evangelical identity crisis, and the fragmentation of evangelicalism amounted to a weak internal strength of the movement to press forward the biblical theistic perspective in the world.

II. A RESPONSE TO HENRY’S EVANGELICAL VISION

Henry occupies a prominent place in the rich history of evangelicalism. The acknowledgement of Henry’s legacy need not imply a wholesale embrace of his opinions, yet his writings hold inspiration to which evangelicals should turn for valuable insights. This section addresses a few issues in relation to Henry’s evangelical vision that are crucial to the well-being of the evangelical community, or have been overlooked in extant studies of Henry.

A. The Formation of a Christian Worldview

Henry’s lifelong passion, as Kenneth Kantzer remarked, had always been “to build the edifice of a Christian world and life view, and trading blows with all who would attack it, seeking to weaken

⁴¹Henry preferred the term “inconsistent” (Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 365).

⁴²Henry, *Conversations With Carl Henry*, 32.

or destroy it."⁴³ The seed of this passion took root in Henry's heart during his student days at Wheaton College, particularly while reading the book, *The Christian View of God and the World*, by the Scottish theologian, James Orr.⁴⁴ More recently, in 1998, noting a decreasing interest in worldview thinking among evangelical churches and institutions, Henry said,

Many evangelical colleges that long considered exposition of the Christian world-life view an academic imperative, now neglect critical analysis and evaluation, sidestep conflict with evolutionary theory, and focus instead on reconciliation and respectability.⁴⁵

Viewed as a by-product indebted to the rationalist obsession with cognitive interests in the Age of Reason, the type of worldview seeking to present objective knowledge of the reality about God and world has been marginalized, if not completely rejected by many thinkers and scholars. With the rise of postmodernism, there has been a growing skepticism casting doubt on the meaningfulness, or even the possibility, of pursuing a Christian worldview constituting a vision of life grounded in objective truths.⁴⁶

In the inaugural volume of "Studies in a Christian World View," a series of which Henry served as the editor-in-chief, Arthur Holmes declared "the problem of subjectivism" as the major complaint against the idea of "a unifying perspective" informed by objective truth.⁴⁷ In surveying the development of the concept of "worldview," David Naugle also observes that the term itself has acquired a "relativistic" connotation in the postmodern milieu,⁴⁸ partly a result of the postmodernist celebration of cultural diversity and tribal perspectives. Since all worldviews bear the marks of their times, it has been alleged that encapsulated beliefs and values are unavoidably culture-laden. Seen in this postmodern light, the task of formulating a culture-transcending and internally coherent Christian world-life view is considered futile.

There is, however, a significant step from a culture-conditioned to a culture-determined way of thinking. Evangelicals do not deny the postmodernist insight that the perspective from which every person views the world is more or less affected by his or her own particular location in history. But the recognition of cultural variety need not imply a concession to cultural pluralism. Postmodernists tend to overstate the role of culture and ideology in governing all

⁴³Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry: An Appreciation," in Carson and Woodbridge, eds., *God and Culture*, 377.

⁴⁴Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 75-76.

⁴⁵Carl F. H. Henry, "Fortunes of the Christian World View," *TJ* 19 (1998): 166.

⁴⁶See *ibid.*, 163-76.

⁴⁷Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a World View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 45.

⁴⁸David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 253-59.

thought forms. The net consequence is the undermining of the admirable pursuit for a genuine knowledge of God and the world in any objective sense. Whereas absolute objectivity in knowledge is too lofty to reach, through critical reflection and rigorous exegesis, we can approximate it. The Christian pursuit for "a unifying perspective" with God at the center should not be abandoned. Rather, it must be insisted and carried onward with both courage and humility. As Millard Erickson observed a decade earlier, the importance of living out a distinct Christian lifestyle and challenging cultural and secular assumptions had not been a subject of interest in many Protestant churches.⁴⁹ The time is now ripe to put the task of setting forth a theologically profound and culturally sensitive Christian world-life view at the top of the agenda of the church. Doubtless Henry's writings are a rich wellspring to turn to for help in this task.

B. Henry and Foundationalism

Closely related to worldview thinking is the subject of epistemology. Despite Henry's open rejection of Cartesian and Kantian epistemology and the Enlightenment *Weltbild*, his approach to theology has been criticized as being informed or even governed by the modern paradigm.⁵⁰ Responding to Henry's critique of narrative theology, Hans Frei conjoined liberals and evangelicals together as cousins sharing the same epistemological assumptions.⁵¹ On another occasion, Frei said that Henry's employment of "basic philosophical principles" in theological discourse caused his prolegomena to succumb to the philosophical presuppositions of his time.⁵² Donald Bloesch leveled his charges against Henry's assertion on the priority of propositional revelation, accusing him of following "rationalistic idealism" in exalting reason to be the chief means in achieving knowledge and accessing a univocal truth of God.⁵³ In his theological agenda to move forward postconservative theology in line with the postmodern pulse, Stanley Grenz said that Henry was a "rationalist apologist" and a foundationalist who had naively presupposed the orthodoxy of his own position, thus lacking

⁴⁹Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Mind and Heart: Perspectives on Theological and Practical Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 39-41.

⁵⁰For arguments against the charge of Henry as a modernist, see Chad O. Brand, "Is Carl Henry a Modernist? Rationalism and Foundationalism in Post-War Evangelical Theology," *TJ* 20 (1999): 3-21. Part of the discussion below relies on Brand's essay.

⁵¹See Hans W. Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *TJ* 8 (1987): 24; Carl F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *TJ* 8 (1987): 3-19. See also David K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *JETS* 36 (1993): 506-11.

⁵²Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher; New Haven: Yale University, 1992), 24.

⁵³Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit. Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 252-54.

openness to learn from contemporary theology in contextualizing the Christian faith.⁵⁴

A few comments may be offered to temper these charges. The first is one concerning the general theological climate of mid-twentieth-century Protestant theology, where reason was pushed aside as peripheral. At this time Darwinism was gaining momentum in liberal circles. Its anthropological view, Henry keenly observed, defamed the human mind as a "by-product" of the evolutionary process in tracing its root back to "animal ancestry."⁵⁵ In their revolt against naturalism and liberal Protestantism, neo-orthodox theologians turned to promote a personal and non-propositional view of revelation.⁵⁶ In the wake of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the twenties, the worth of academic pursuit and serious cognitive thinking was downplayed in many fundamentalist churches. Viewed against the above background, Henry's assertion of the indispensability of reason in Christianity was in fact a heroic attempt to keep Protestant theology from falling into cognitive shallowness. Second, an emphasis on rational theological discourse and the rationality of Christianity does not necessarily imply an adoption of rationalism and positivism. However crucial the mind was, Henry denied it the supreme role as the sole means of knowing or "an omnipotent source for ultimate truth."⁵⁷ Neither could it originate the content of knowledge.⁵⁸ Third, while insisting on the priority of the form of proposition, Henry never undermined the worth of other literary genres in expressing truth and their role in making "a positive contribution" to "God's revelatory communication,"⁵⁹ a point noted by Kevin Vanhoozer in 1986. Nevertheless, Henry maintained that "revelation in the Bible is essentially a mental conception"⁶⁰ and that God's disclosure could only be conveyed intelligibly in the context construed by "the logical relationships of words."⁶¹ Fourth, the allegation of Henry as a foundationalist adopting Cartesian epistemology and uncritically accepting some ideas as the indubitable source for knowledge

⁵⁴Stanley J Grenz, *Renewing the Center Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids Baker, 2000), 101 See also his collaborated work with John R Frank, *Beyond Foundationalism Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville Westminster John Knox, 2001), 60-63

⁵⁵Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1 152, cf Brand, "Is Carl Henry a Modernist?" 15

⁵⁶For Henry's early analysis of contemporary Protestant theology, see Carl F H Henry, *The Protestant Dilemma An Analysis of the Current Impasse in Theology* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1949)

⁵⁷Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 2 133, cf the section on "reason" in *ibid* , 1 85-95

⁵⁸See also the discussion in Brand, "Is Carl Henry a Modernist?" 14

⁵⁹Kevin J Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (ed D A Carson and John D Woodbridge, 2d ed , Grand Rapids Baker, 1995), 69

⁶⁰Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3 248

⁶¹*Ibid* , 3 446

simply lacks substantial warrant. Preoccupied with the modern ideal of arriving at perfect knowledge and absolute objectivity in truth, classical/hard foundationalism has collapsed in terms of being a viable epistemic method. But as several scholars have noted, its demise does not mean that all types of foundationalism should be repudiated. Soft foundationalism, as a milder form of source-foundationalism, has been posited as holding promise for evangelical theology.⁶² It avoids treading either the modern path of epistemological absolutism and classical foundationalism or the postmodern road to epistemological relativism, perspectivalism, and pure subjectivism. Unlike the classical foundationalist view of certitude and knowledge, Henry was well aware of human limitation in coming to neutral viewpoints and perfect knowledge. He said, the “idea of a presuppositionless observer is fictional.”⁶³ “[N]o interpreter is wholly—nor is he ideally so—free of presuppositions.”⁶⁴ For Henry, the Scripture per se remained his secure theological bedrock and basic source for knowledge. It was the fountainhead of truth from which the complex web of non-basic beliefs was formed into a coherent whole. At the same time, he realized that no human knowledge—including his—was infallible. Put simply, if the term “foundationalist” is to be applied to Henry’s theological outlook, his sounds more like that of a soft than a hard foundationalist.⁶⁵

C. The Neglected Side: Henry’s Passion for Evangelism

Much has been said of Henry’s pivotal role in the resurgence of twentieth-century evangelicalism on the American public stage. His passion for evangelism and mission, however, was no less than the zeal for social justice.

Two of Henry’s early writings merit mention. It may be a surprise to many people that Henry’s very first publication (1942) is neither a theological nor philosophical treatise. His writing career began with a narrative of the Pacific Garden Mission, the oldest rescue mission in the Northwest and the second oldest in America.⁶⁶ Founded in 1877, and located near Chicago’s Loop, the goal of the organization is to share the gospel to the poor and supply their basic material needs. With emotive words, Henry filled the pages of his book with numerous stories of people coming to know Jesus through

⁶²For an evangelical defense for soft/modest foundationalism, see David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 152-64, J. P. Moreland and Garrett De Weese, “The Premature Report of Foundationalism’s Demise,” in *Reclaiming the Center* (ed. Millard J. Erickson, Paul K. Helseth, and Justin Taylor; Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 81-107.

⁶³Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 5:25.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 4:388.

⁶⁵Cf. Brand, “Is Carl Henry a Modernist?” 15-21.

⁶⁶See Carl F. H. Henry, *The Pacific Garden Mission A Doorway to Heaven* (6th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964).

the rescue mission's ministries. These include the dramatic conversion of the famous evangelist Billy Sunday, the former baseball player of the Chicago team, in 1886. Mel Trotter, a hopeless drunk who could not hold himself off liquor more than two hours after the funeral of his two-year old son, found eternal hope at the mission's center on the night he had planned to commit suicide. It is difficult to read these stories and not be impressed by the writer's heartfelt concern for the salvation of the lost.

Another work is Henry's published Th.D. dissertation, completed at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1942, and subsequently released under the title *Successful Church Publicity* (1943).⁶⁷ In it Henry offered practical opinions and suggestions from his rich experiences in journalism to help the church in reaching out to her neighborhood through every possible means of publicity. Besides taking care of the needs of the congregation, Henry believed that every pastor must simultaneously commit himself to be a "Christian publicist" in spreading the good news. In his words, "The proclamation of the Gospel is [the pastor's] prime task; any method that will further this work effectively and respectably is a religious imperative."⁶⁸ But rather than being a mere means of advertisement, the secular press was for "the Christian visionary" a "mission field" ripe for harvest and in need of workers.⁶⁹

In 1966, with Billy Graham as the honorary chairman, Henry chaired the World Congress on Evangelism at Berlin. Nearly twelve hundred Christian leaders and missionaries from over one hundred nations took part in this history-making international conference. The Congress' visionary title—"One Race, One Gospel, One Task"—signals Henry's passion for global evangelism through conjoining international evangelical forces. All of the conference's seven objectives focused on the importance of "biblical evangelism" and its relevance to the world.⁷⁰ Shortly before Henry left *Christianity Today* (1968), several issues were devoted to topics of evangelism and missions: "Rebirth" (March 29); "The Church's Defection From a Divine Mission" (May 24); "The Changing Face of Missions" (June 7); and "Technology, Modern Man, and the Gospel" (July 5). Among the four social strategies compared in *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, it is the method of "spiritual regeneration" which held the ultimate promise in changing the world.⁷¹ While asserting the social role of Christianity, Henry never lost sight of the necessity of the

⁶⁷Carl F. H. Henry, *Successful Church Publicity: A Guidebook for Christian Publicists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943).

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁰Online: <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/GUIDES/0.14.htm> (cited 30 December 2005).

⁷¹Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, 22-30.

proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. Like the early Christians, he deemed it as the "Number One" task of the church.⁷²

D. The Need for a Defensive Strategy in Encountering Culture

Evidently, at the inceptive stage of neo-evangelicalism, Henry held extraordinary optimism for its prospects of winning the culture war and of its capability to maintain Christian orthodoxy and resist worldly temptations. This confidence is notable in the absence of any warning against the danger of cultural assimilation in his early writings. Many conservatives responded to the call for social transformation and stepped out of the safe religious ghetto to engage culture. Some pursued higher education in secular universities rather than Christian colleges. Others began to dialogue with the liberals. At the crossroad of evangelicalism and culture, what happened? Near the end of the last century, Erickson observed seven common features found in both evangelicalism and modernism: (1) accommodation to the culture; (2) an emphasis on "temporal needs"; (3) anthropocentrism; (4) the adoption of secular and cultural values; (5) an "obsession with success"; (6) the reliance on high technology; and (7) a "de-emphasis of sin."⁷³ From a historical perspective, what made Henry so confident of the prospect of evangelicalism that little attention was paid to the possible penetration of culture into evangelicalism?

Fundamental to Henry's strong belief in the evangelical prospect to achieve an advance against secular and cultural challenges was his conviction of the superiority of evangelical Christianity, that its biblical theism was the most faithful, rational, and coherent theological expression of the gospel in comparison to all other non-evangelical options. When placed side-by-side, the weaknesses and fallacies of non-Christian viewpoints would be exposed and the biblical tradition would shine. In keeping with his theological reflection, Henry stressed more the evangelical strategy to attack, rather than that to defend.

We must also not overlook the significance of Henry's conversion, which he described as his "great awakening,"⁷⁴ in anchoring his conviction of the life-changing power of the gospel.⁷⁵ Henry described the turning point of his life, June 10, 1933, in this way:

⁷²Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, 65. See the whole chapter "The Theology of Evangelism" on pp. 55-72. For Henry's understanding of the "partnership" relation of evangelism and social justice, see Carl F. H. Henry, "The Tensions Between Evangelism and the Christian Demand For Social Justice," *Fides et Historia* 4 (Spring 1972): 3-10.

⁷³Erickson, *The Evangelical Mind and Heart*, 200-205.

⁷⁴Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 46.

⁷⁵The pivotal role of Henry's conversion in changing the course of his life has been noted by Woodbridge in his "Carl F. H. Henry: Spokesperson for American Evangelicalism," 379-81.

Then I acknowledged my sinful condition and prayed God to cleanse my life of the accumulated evil of the years, to empty me of self and to make resident within me the Holy Spirit to guide and rule my life. By the end of that prayer the wonder was wrought. . . . A floodtide of peace and joy swept over me. My life's future, I was confident, was now anchored in and charted by another world, the truly real world.⁷⁶

The total commitment to follow Jesus changed Henry's aspiration radically from pursuing a newspaper career to being a theologian in service for God's kingdom. Even suffering from a serious illness just two weeks prior to his first semester at Wheaton did not shake his faith.⁷⁷ In the early years of his Christian life, Henry already decided to act out what he believed and to live a life in accordance with the high calling from above.

Although some evangelical thinkers were affected by liberal teaching in secular universities, Henry himself had a successful experience.⁷⁸ During his doctoral studies at Boston University, Henry was able to withstand the attacks of modern philosophies and keep the faith. Other early neo-evangelical leaders were also able to maintain orthodoxy in the environment of liberal academies. Kantzer earned his doctorate at Harvard University and studied theology abroad in Germany and Switzerland. Ockenga, likewise, received a degree of Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh. Whereas no evidence suggests that Henry's personal Christian experience played a definitive role in determining his evangelical strategy, it is clear that Henry's deep conviction in the transformative power of evangelicalism in society was not empty talk, but rather a belief grounded and manifest in his Christian life.

In the end, we must admit that the reason behind Henry's little attention to the pitfall of cultural accommodation in the forties and fifties remains uncertain. But it is apparent that neo-evangelicalism, when plunged into the world with a great zeal to transform culture, lacked a strong defensive strategy to safeguard its spiritual purity. The obvious lesson today's evangelicals should learn from history is to expend efforts in strengthening its internal defense system.

III. CONCLUSION

The power of evangelicalism in shaping the future does not only depend on its competency in interpreting the current cultural climate, but also on its diligence in learning from the best of its heritage. This essay has sought to underline the central role of the formation of a Christian world-life view within the overall framework of Henry's evangelical enterprise. Personally, I am

⁷⁶Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian*, 46

⁷⁷See the story in *ibid.*, 56-59.

⁷⁸See Miller, "Carl F. H. Henry and *Christianity Today*," 198-99.

convinced that the outward-spirit of evangelicalism to confront culture and to shape it by biblical criteria must be carried forward. But for evangelicalism to be a capable influence in society, a winsome defensive strategy for safeguarding the Christian faith needs to be charted. It was wanting in Henry's early writings. Yet this does not diminish his weighty contribution to the thriving of modern American evangelicalism and to the recovering of the long tradition of social engagement in Christian history. Rather than being a relic of the past, Henry's vision remains relevant to evangelicalism today. His voice, it should not be doubted, deserves to be heard in the twenty-first century.⁷⁹

⁷⁹I am grateful to Dr. John D. Woodbridge in his helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.