

## THE NEW EVANGELICALISM: EVALUATIONS AND PROSPECTS

by  
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The new evangelicalism has been slowly but decidedly moving leftward toward neo-orthodoxy and worse. This trend was observed and warned against by fundamentalists early on when they spoke about new evangelicalism's departures in the areas of revelation, inspiration, and ecumenism, among others. Fundamentalists also feared that the technique of "dialogue" would cause an acceptance of neo-orthodox if not neo-liberal principles in the effort to find common ground and rapprochement with such scholars and leaders. The downward trajectory of new evangelicalism demonstrates that it is impossible to maintain a lofty rational objectivity and theological neutrality while exploring the so-called strengths of unbelieving scholarship for mutual enrichment, possible Christian fellowship, and organizational cooperation. The pacifistic and irenic spirit so necessary and coveted in dialogue prevents a needed biblical confrontation and soon gives way to a toleration and, in some cases, an embracing of unscriptural ideas.

Millard Erickson noted in 1968 already that the new evangelicalism "has been moving in the general direction of neo-orthodoxy. Some fundamental critics maintain that it already has moved to an essentially neo-orthodox position."<sup>2</sup> One need not look far for the names of those who at one time professed to be new evangelical but later embraced many non-evangelical tenets, and one would be extremely reticent to apply to them any longer the name evangelical. Fuller Theological Seminary cannot be considered evangelical, largely due to the drift consciously presided over by David Allan Hubbard during his long tenure as president (1963–1993).<sup>3</sup> Billy Graham, Clark Pinnock,

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<sup>2</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1968), p. 226.

<sup>3</sup>A very concise but informative account of Hubbard's success in changing Fuller Seminary's direction is given by Timothy Weber, "His Life and Ministry," in *Studies in Old Testament Theology*, ed. Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Robert K. Johnston, and

Bernard Ramm, Donald Bloesch, Daniel P. Fuller, J. Ramsey Michaels, Robert Gundry, Stanley Grenz, and Gregory Boyd, to say nothing of lesser-known men and women, have also forfeited the designation of evangelical in my judgment, if their pronouncements, writings, and actions over the last few decades represent their true convictions.

This comes as no surprise to fundamentalists because the greatest hedge against this corruption by association (1 Cor 15:33) is the practice of ecclesiastical separation. Since the repudiation of this doctrine was probably the chief cornerstone of the new evangelicalism from its inception, the movement had a manifest destiny of deterioration in theology and ambivalence in practice from the beginning. Its anti-separatist obsession left it shorn of the God-appointed means of preserving and propagating true Christianity. Carl F. H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, J. Elwin Wright, Edward John Carnell, L. Nelson Bell, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and others, many of whom were active behind the scenes, must bear the onus and ultimate responsibility for the misfortunes of the new evangelicalism in the last sixty years. It was their thinking that set the sails of the movement back in the 1940s and 50s and, while they may lament the leftward plummet of their protégés, students, and ecclesiastical descendants, there is no escaping their contribution, passively and indirectly or otherwise, to the movement's drift from its biblical moorings.

In 1969 Harold Lindsell made several predictions regarding his fellow new evangelicals. He foresaw theological deterioration, erosion of ethics and morality, substantial involvement in social and political activism to the detriment of the proclamation of the gospel, and defection to the ecumenical movement.<sup>4</sup> He seemed to be especially wary of social involvement, warning against the notion that "saved men will save society."<sup>5</sup> He observed almost caustically:

Evangelicals must not accept the nonsense which says that if you feed men, house men, and clothe them, they will turn to the church. This is not true.... The evangelical needs to be careful that he does not fall into the error created by those who insist that the church ought to be relevant.... It is a fact that the Gospel is irrelevant to those whose eyes are

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Robert P. Meye (Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 21–27. The book was a tribute to David Allan Hubbard on his 65th birthday in honor of his 29 years as president of Fuller. Weber caught the genius of the Hubbard presidency in one sentence: "Under Hubbard's leadership, the course of Fuller Seminary was firmly set" (p. 24).

<sup>4</sup>Harold Lindsell, *Evangelicalism and the Next Ten Years* (Wheaton, IL: National Association of Evangelicals, 1969), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

blinded by sin.... Ultimately the Gospel is relevant to the true needs of men and for us to try to debase the good coinage of the Gospel by vitiating it so that we can make it more attractive to men is to lose the Gospel and make it irrelevant.<sup>6</sup>

In a 1979 analysis, Harold O. J. Brown of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School concluded that “in the 1970s a challenge to evangelical identity arose within evangelicalism itself.... Evangelicalism appears as a whole to have shifted leftward—theologically and politically—in the effort to defend liberalism’s abandoned positions from militant secularism.”<sup>7</sup> In his view, the new evangelical movement in 1979 had become “muzzled” after capturing “the highest peak of American political power—the election of Jimmy Carter as President late in 1976.”<sup>8</sup>

The next year Carl Henry expressed his regrets over the movement he had spearheaded.

A decade ago I thought that late 20th century America might be on the move, however hesitatingly, toward a theological renaissance.... Might not evangelicals who were beginning to wrestle with sociopolitical concerns also take theology more seriously? At present I see too little prospect for that.<sup>9</sup>

During the 1960s I somewhat romanced the possibility that a vast evangelical alliance might arise in the United States to coordinate effectively a national impact in evangelism, education, publication, and sociopolitical action.<sup>10</sup>

Henry felt that the possibility of such a broad alliance, remote as it may have seemed, “was both shaped and lost...by evangelist Billy Graham” because “to call for an evangelical countermovement that might penetrate ecumenical ranks would have eroded ecumenical support for the crusades.”<sup>11</sup> He lamented the fact that at the time no evangelical leader or agency had the dynamic to pull the movement together; differences were causing his new evangelical brethren an identity

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 8–9.

<sup>7</sup>Harold O. J. Brown, “The Church of the 1970s: A Decade of Flux,” *Christianity Today* (21 December 1979), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, “American Evangelicals in a Turning Time,” *The Christian Century* (5 November 1980), p. 1059.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 1060.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

crisis.<sup>12</sup> Note that he was airing his complaints before the non-evangelical community via a liberal mouthpiece—*The Christian Century*.

Kenneth Kantzer gave a “mid-course self-appraisal” in 1983 in which he listed ten areas of evangelical weakness, among which were weak institutions, reactionary tendencies and combative style, poor leadership, immature followers, and doctrinal and ethical ignorance.<sup>13</sup> He also noted several strengths to offset the weakness, among which were evangelicalism’s numbers (one third to one half of Protestants were allegedly evangelical), heritage, a coherent philosophy of life, and a self-correcting authority, the Bible.<sup>14</sup> His middle-of-the road appraisal seemed to err on the optimistic side.

The first voice of volume and weight to be sounded against the impending evangelical collapse was that of Francis Schaeffer in 1984. He pointedly named the biblical inerrancy/authority issue as the great “watershed” that was dividing evangelicals.<sup>15</sup> Defections within the new evangelicalism on this doctrine led Schaeffer to warn: “*Compromising the full authority of Scripture eventually affects what it means to be a Christian theologically and how we live in the full spectrum of human life*” (italics his).<sup>16</sup> He saw looming on the new evangelical horizon a “new neo-orthodoxy” abetted by those who denied the propositional authority of the Bible in favor of some form of existential feeling.<sup>17</sup> He castigated those evangelicals who were trying to be “with it” and seemingly oblivious of the outcome in religious thought to which neo-orthodoxy had led in the 1960s, namely, the God-is-dead fascination.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, his warnings, which actually began back in the 1960s, went largely unheeded.

Harold Lindsell in 1985 had a very pessimistic view of the direction of the new evangelical movement, noting “evangelicalism today is in a sad state of disarray. In many quarters it has ceased to be what its founding fathers intended.”<sup>19</sup> He saw the years 1940 to 1980 as the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 1061.

<sup>13</sup>Kenneth S. Kantzer, “Evangelicalism: Midcourse Self-Appraisal,” *Christianity Today* (7 January 1983), pp. 10–11.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), pp. 44, 51.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 44–45.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>19</sup>Harold Lindsell, “Evangelicalism’s Golden Age,” *Moody* (December 1985),

rising tide and influence of the new evangelicalism, but since 1980 the foundations of the movement had been shaken and the constituency divided.<sup>20</sup> He felt the peak or “golden age” of new evangelicalism was in the 1970s. Since then the movement had become diluted to the point where “it is difficult to define what and who an evangelical is.”<sup>21</sup> He asked rhetorically, if not a bit sarcastically, if one can be an evangelical if he does not accept the historical authenticity of Adam and Eve or the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, if he thinks there was more than one Isaiah, if he says the Book of Daniel was written *after* the “predictions” were made, if he says Paul did not write Ephesians or the Pastoral Epistles, if he says 2 Peter was not written by the apostle Peter, or if he says that God is not really omniscient. Lindsell affirmed that these views had been published by professing evangelicals.<sup>22</sup> His conclusion was darksome to say the least: “It is clear that evangelicalism is now broader and shallower, and is becoming more so. Evangelicalism’s children are in the process of forsaking the faith of their fathers.”<sup>23</sup> Lindsell undoubtedly was referring to the loss of biblical inerrancy in the new evangelical movement, a tragedy he tried valiantly to reverse by publishing two well-documented and very telling books on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

In 1986 Harold O. J. Brown again was not too pleased with the status of new evangelicalism, nor with its future.

Evangelicalism seems to be a kind of least common denominator of pietistic tendencies and revivalistic fervor in Christianity, having much in common with more distinctive movements such as pentecostalism and fundamentalism, and also being subject to the criticism that it is fuzzy and not solidly biblical.<sup>25</sup>

Brown saw a multiplication of numbers in the future ranks of evangelicalism but also noted ominously that “following some of their intellectual leaders many evangelicals will tend to align themselves with mainline Protestantism and ecumenism and to play down the theological convictions and controversies that gave them their

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p. 113.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) and *The Bible in the Balance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

<sup>25</sup>Harold O. J. Brown, “Evangelicalism in America,” *Dialog* 24 (Fall 1986): 191.

distinctives.”<sup>26</sup>

In the mid 1980s Carl Henry further expressed his disappointment with the movement he and others fathered. In his autobiography’s final chapter, titled “The Evangelical Prospects in America,” he summed up his forecast in the opening sentences:

I have two main convictions about the near-term future of American Christianity. One is that American evangelicals presently face their biggest opportunity since the Protestant Reformation, if not since the apostolic age. The other is that Americans are forfeiting that opportunity stage by stage, despite the fact that evangelical outcomes in the twentieth century depend upon decisions currently in the making.<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere Henry expressed his disappointment and pessimism by observing that 1976, the “Year of the Evangelical,” in which fifty million Americans professed to be born again, “marked the peak of a movement that had slowly emerged from its cultural ghetto through incentives like the Graham crusades, the founding of Fuller, and the launching of *Christianity Today* as a thought journal.”<sup>28</sup> He went on to imply further blame on his contemporary evangelicals:

The twentieth century in which evangelicals proposed to win the world for Christ in a single generation has in fact become the age in which religious atheism swept millions of persons into its ranks and in which political atheism now rules half the world’s population and much of its land mass.<sup>29</sup>

The next year (1988) Henry again charged the evangelical movement with gradually forfeiting its opportunities for global impact until its diversities were threatening to fragment it in the areas of evangelism, missions, education, literature, and the arts. The lack of a unified philosophy made various evangelical political efforts cancel each other out.<sup>30</sup>

Vernon Grounds, one of the early movers of the new evangelicalism among the Conservative Baptists, was not very optimistic about the future of the new evangelical movement. In the face of what

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), p. 381.

<sup>28</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, “The Uneasy Conscience Revisited: Current Theological, Ethical and Social Concerns,” *Theology News and Notes* (December 1987), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>30</sup>McKendree Langley and Don McCrory, “A Conversation with Carl F. H. Henry,” *Eternity* (January 1988), p. 20.

appeared to be forthcoming problems and departures from truth in the coming generation, Grounds continually invoked the “GOK” (God only knows). Aside from what God knows, Grounds gave the impression that what he knows was not very encouraging.<sup>31</sup> This was his response to J. D. Hunter’s evaluation of a cross-section of evangelical college and seminary students and the bleak outlook it posed for the next generation of evangelicals.<sup>32</sup>

Other evaluations of a negative sound came out during the later 1980s and early 1990s, but it was David Wells, a theologian from the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, who delivered probably the most penetrating and withering analysis of the movement’s loss of sound doctrine.<sup>33</sup> What was especially irksome to many was that Wells was a fellow new evangelical who dared to expose and effectively kill many of new evangelicalism’s contented sacred cows. His book chronicles and analyzes the breakdown of evangelical theology at the hands of “modernity” which came on the heels of the prior erosion brought on by the Arminianism of the nineteenth century. Wells noted that the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century America, largely driven by Charles G. Finney and his “new measures” in evangelism, ushered in what he termed a new “Age of Protestantism.”<sup>34</sup> This new era was characterized by an overthrow of the Puritan-Calvinist beliefs of the First Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards. In the new Age of Protestantism the grandeur of God in His sovereignty was displaced by the majesty of man in his autonomy. God was almighty, almost. This new principle coincided with the fundamental premise of the budding American democracy—the freedom of man.

Modernity, by his definition, was the final legacy of the emancipated thought of the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason, a movement of ideas launched by the powerful though godless minds of philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Modernity, called by Wells “Our Time,”<sup>35</sup> began about 1850–1875 and was propelled by forces such as technology and urbanization in an ocean of pluralism and multiculturalism. Modernity in principle rejected

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<sup>31</sup>Vernon Grounds, “American Evangelicalism: *Quo Vadis?*” *TSF Bulletin* (May–June 1987), pp. 7–10.

<sup>32</sup>James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>33</sup>David C. Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 54–57, 61, *passim*.

absolute truth or any unifying center to human thought and embraced the Unknown God of relativism. This fathered a rootlessness in education, government, art, music, architecture, philosophy, morality, and, of course, religion, among others. In theology the Age of Reason first produced modernism, an optimistic web of religious thought in which nothing was off limits to the inquiring mind. This was followed by other forms of the same mental independence such as neo-orthodoxy and neo-liberalism.

In new evangelicalism the spirit of modernity played down any stress on Bible doctrine in favor of an emphasis on cultural and personal “life,” not unlike the path trod by the old modernism.<sup>36</sup> With this loss of its convictions, evangelicalism became absorbed into the self-movement where psychology instead of theology dominated. Happiness itself became an object of pursuit rather than a by-product of a right relationship with God and correct moral behavior. Being true to oneself (being all we’re meant to be) took precedence over sacrifice for others. Wells showed that conformity, equality, the exaltation of the average, and the rise of a bland “Everyperson”<sup>37</sup> had become pervasive in new evangelicalism as well as in the general culture. The author demonstrated that in the forefront of this vacuous new thought were the likes of Robert Schuller and his psychologized possibility thinking.<sup>38</sup> *Leadership Magazine* and *Christianity Today* also participated in the new relativism.<sup>39</sup> In the popular church growth movement, a community of “felt needs” set the church’s agenda, and opinion polls and marketing manuals supplanted authoritative theology and preachers as guides of the new democratized faith. As a result seminary curricula emphasized relational, psychological, and CEO management type courses, and ministry tracks known for “breadth” rather than “depth” mushroomed at the expense of Bible truth. Enrollments and income increased but theology disintegrated.

Wells did not delineate a clear picture of the way out of the malaise in *No Place for Truth*, saving that for a later book. He did note, however, that “revival” (in the traditional sense of revivalism) was not really the answer. Instead, a thoroughgoing reformation with a genuine recovery of God and theology were needed.<sup>40</sup> The nineteenth century

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<sup>36</sup>For this emphasis on “life” by liberals, see John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through Its Development* (New York: Scribners, 1954), p. 156.

<sup>37</sup>*No Place for Truth*, p. 189.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 175, 178, 289.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 113–14; 207–11.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 283–301.

revivalism of Charles Finney was shaped by human techniques. Evangelicalism since then had “turned from dependence on God to management of God.”<sup>41</sup> Wells was convinced that any hope for a genuine and lasting extraction out of the present evangelical quagmire must at least go back to the essential model of Jonathan Edwards and the First Great Awakening of eighteenth century America.

The future of the new evangelical movement, such as it is, is bound up with its concept of ultimate religious authority. There has been a struggle from the beginning over this defining issue. The early new evangelical thinkers claimed the Bible as final authority but their verificationist/evidentialist apologetic methodology betrayed the claim by substituting an alien, free-from-God authority to test and verify God and His revelation-claims. It can be argued that this led eventually to a surrender of biblical inerrancy and thus of a rightful claim to an absolute divine authority. Bit-by-bit, scholar-by-scholar, the new evangelicals brought themselves to their present impasse on authority. What is being advocated on the leading edge of evangelical thinking today is some sort of a religious jurisdiction that is non-authoritarian and non-absolute but also is not totally malleable and contemporary. Not wishing to choose between postliberal, culture-controlled relativism and old fundamentalist authoritarian absolutism, there has arisen an attempt to cut a middle channel by synthesizing the cultural-sensitive input of secular philosophy with the general tenets of the biblical story. The result has been a drift away from any genuine notion of absolute biblical authority to a vague, flat idea of an evangelical community consensus as some kind of a court of appeal. This is expressed clearly and favorably by Robert E. Webber.<sup>42</sup> What this bodes for the future of the new evangelicalism is rather self-evident.

There has been movement away from absolute biblical authority in the new evangelical ranks for quite some time. This has been acknowledged from within by a few fellow new evangelicals who clearly disliked it. More recently a theological “megashift” has been taking place, a form of “new model thinking” going on that is “dividing evangelicals on a deep level.”<sup>43</sup>

A serious fracture within the new evangelical movement occurred in the 1970s when its leaders and avant-garde thinkers reacted against Harold Lindsell and his exposure of those who were denying biblical

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

<sup>42</sup>*The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), part 2, “The Younger Evangelical Thinkers.”

<sup>43</sup>Robert Brow, “Evangelical Megashift,” *Christianity Today* (19 February 1990), p. 12.

inerrancy. Lindsell was the last of the “classic evangelicals.”<sup>44</sup> Out of the vacuum on authority left by those who denied inerrancy, Robert Johnston already in the late 1970s proposed a consensus authority, that of a community of interpreters rather than that of an absolute, objective authority of the truth of Scripture. He termed his proposal “the collective wisdom of the best minds and spirits working together on the theological task of the church.”<sup>45</sup> This has finally culminated at the turn of this century in the “younger evangelical” movement which is prescribing just such an authority.<sup>46</sup>

Stanley Grenz advocated a “revisioning” of evangelical theology along the lines of postmodern thought, especially those of a “narrative” interpretation of Scripture that understands the Bible in terms of the general “story” of redemption rather than seeing Scripture as an inerrant text of propositions from God about redemption. Grenz complained that this latter approach focused on “epistemology or the cognitive dimension of faith, rather than toward our shared piety.”<sup>47</sup> According to him,

Central to evangelicalism is a common vision of the faith that arises out of a common religious experience couched within a common interpretive framework consisting in theological beliefs we gain from Scripture. As evangelicals we are persons who sense that we have encountered the living God through the gospel message of Jesus Christ. We describe this encounter by means of a set of theological categories derived from the Bible.<sup>48</sup>

So for Grenz, doctrine describes a shared experience or a shared piety.

More than the theological outlook itself, I believe, the way of experiencing the Christian life which as evangelicals we all share...lies at the center of the evangelical ethos. Our cherished theological commitments, in turn, are important insofar as they serve and facilitate this shared life-orientation.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Douglas Jacobsen, “From Truth to Authority to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Evangelical Hermeneutics, 1915–1986, part 2,” *TSF Bulletin* (May–June 1987), p. 12.

<sup>45</sup>Robert K. Johnston, *Evangelicals at an Impasse* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), p. 147, quoted in Jacobsen, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, part 2, “The Younger Evangelical Thinkers.”

<sup>47</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda For the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), p. 62.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

But the author here has it backward. Scriptural doctrine does not merely “describe” a shared experience, as though experience creates doctrine; biblical doctrine *defines* all valid religious experience. Grenz wants evangelicalism to advance beyond a creed-based coalition to one originating from a common experience, a community of believers with shared convictions. But questions arise: precisely *what* do “believers” believe if Christianity is not defined by its propositions? And from *where* do the “convictions” originate that are shared? If they arise out of a pure vacuum, which is apparently the case, then the proposal is self-destructive and worthless.

Elsewhere Grenz contoured the infrastructure of a postmodern evangelical theology along three lines. First, it is post-individual. The “community” mediates to the individual in Christian matters.<sup>50</sup> Second, it is post-rational. Instead of theology fixated on and derived from rational propositions of the verbal revelation from God, theological propositions are merely the vehicles for the faith community to comment on and express its transforming religious experience of encountering God.<sup>51</sup> Third, it is centered on spirituality not doctrine. In other words, theology must be intensely “practical” or it is useless. In Grenz’s words: “In the postmodern world we must reappropriate the older pietist discovery that a ‘right heart’ takes primacy over a ‘right head.’”<sup>52</sup> Evangelical Roger Olson describes Grenz’s theological method:

Grenz emphasizes experience over supernaturally revealed propositional truth as the heart of Christian theology. He defines theology as reflection on the faith of the people of God—a second-order activity that provides useful models rather than the scientific deduction of intellectual truth from a mother lode of truth in Scripture.<sup>53</sup>

Theology is second-order reflection on the faith.... The essence of both Christianity and theology, then, is not propositional truths enshrined in doctrine, but a narrative-shaped experience.<sup>54</sup>

If theology is a second-order reflection on one’s experience of the overarching narrative of redemption in the Bible, then where is

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<sup>50</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, “Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: *Star Trek* and the Next Generation,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994): 330–31.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>53</sup>Roger E. Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” *The Christian Century* (3 May 1995), p. 483.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 481.

ultimate authority? Obviously it is the consensus of the faith community utilizing all the resources of postmodern philosophy and biblical studies at its command that is doing the reflecting. This authority consists of “employing a range of sources in a dialectical way.”<sup>55</sup> But this not only prohibits theology as a correlation of propositional truths from God, it also creates an authority that is purely relative. A secular/religious symposium of human thought is a perilously unstable authority. Postmodern evangelicals are aware that such a consensus authority may well prove to be untrustworthy, and they labor vigorously to assert that it need not and has not so happened. But their dogmatism here is not convincing.<sup>56</sup>

One of the more oxymoronic quirks of the postclassic evangelicals is their quest for a non-foundational authority, a binary authority that tries to combine the text of Scripture with the context of culture in a non-absolutist and non-authoritarian way. Foundationalism holds that a philosophy or belief system must rest on a principle or principles that are transcendent, self-evidencing, or indubitable. Postconservative evangelicals are anti-foundationalists. Rodney Clapp, for instance, thinks “foundationalists need to admit that there is no such thing as safely and absolutely secured knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> Clapp argues that having made that admission, Christians as a faith community can engage non-believers in witness, pointing out to them the desirability of the change proposed for them in their lives and contextual interests. “By drawing others into Christian friendship, telling Christian stories and sharing Christian worship, we may alter the way others interpret their experience and introduce a new set of desires into their desires.”<sup>58</sup> By “Christian stories” he apparently means biblical narratives which serve as models with which one can identify.

Jonathan Wilson, an evangelical in quest of a non-foundationalist religious authority, finds the most fertile source in the proposals and principles of postliberalism. Postliberalism has arisen out of the ashes of defunct and discredited liberal theology to form a religious rapprochement with rootless, non-absolutist, non-authoritarian, and secular postmodern philosophy. Wilson’s eclectic evangelical authority

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<sup>55</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), p. 71.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>57</sup>Rodney Clapp, “How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals Be Nonfoundationalists?” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 89.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

construct is cobbled together with snatches from George Lindbeck with bits and pieces from the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In an amazing note of triumph, Wilson exclaims: "By drawing on Lindbeck's proposal and extending it, I will develop a new evangelical paradigm of biblical authority rooted in practicing the gospel, living in community and interpreting the world."<sup>59</sup> It would probably be considered incredulous to ask where the actual contributions of the Bible itself are in this amalgam of authority.

And so the intellectual vanguard of the new evangelicalism in fewer than sixty years has found itself repudiating any absolute religious authority and instead is advocating an appeal to some kind of agreement among the Christian community. No longer, in this scheme, has the individual Christian an ultimately inerrant and infallible foundation in a series of revelation-claims and propositions in a divine-human book, the Bible. Instead he or she must look in the last analysis to an elite cadre of intellectuals for some kind of direction which they have divined from a smorgasbord of postliberal philosophy and biblical story.

J. D. Hunter, a sociologist, in his 1987 conclusions about evangelicalism, apparently could foresee, somewhat dimly perhaps, what was on the horizon. Based on his analysis of a poll of evangelical college and seminary students, he noted concerning the evangelicals of the later twentieth century:

There is less sharpness, less boldness, and, accordingly, a measure of opaqueness in their theological vision that did not exist in previous generations (at least to their present extent). A dynamic would appear to be operating that strikes at the very heart of the Evangelical self-identity. But what is one to make of it?... The evidence is suggestive of a common trend, one in which the theological tradition is conforming in its own unique way to the cognitive and normative assumptions of modern culture.<sup>60</sup>

The new evangelicals for many years have been rejoicing that they finally had come out of the fundamentalist social "ghetto" and into the mainstream of cultural life and thought,<sup>61</sup> and thereby have gained a certain measure of legitimacy and respectability in their new

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<sup>59</sup>Jonathan R. Wilson, "Toward a New Evangelical Paradigm of Biblical Authority," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 153.

<sup>60</sup>James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, p. 46.

<sup>61</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, "The Uneasy Conscience Revisited," p. 3.

surroundings. But, given that fact, Hunter raised a provoking question and gave an ominous answer:

Certainly, in its move out of the ghetto, it [evangelicalism] has risked the unintentional contamination by the very reality it has tried to keep out. That this process has begun, there is little doubt. Where it will go from here is an open question. If historical precedent is instructive, *it becomes clear that these tendencies will probably escalate* (italics added).<sup>62</sup>

The intervening years have confirmed Hunter's probability assessment. The new evangelicalism as a movement has been incrementally winding its way toward evangelical extinction. If the postmodern proponents succeed in capturing the direction of the movement, and they may well be doing so at the present, then the movement is in the final stages of becoming totally irrelevant.

Having rejected the separatism of their fundamentalist heritage, the new evangelicals self-consciously pursued infiltration and dialogue as their new working principles. This, along with their Thomistic type of apologetics and philosophy of religion, made theology quite malleable in many minds. This soon gave rise to denials of propositional revelation and verbal inerrancy, and new evangelical theology took a precipitous nose-dive in the later 1970s from which, as a general movement, it has never recovered. In ten to fifteen years after the inerrancy crisis, some of its founders and early proponents began virtually to write the movement off as a prodigal son in a far county.

With its rejection of biblical inerrancy and consequent loss of ultimate religious authority, combined with an ever enthusiastic pursuit of the dialogue technique, new evangelicalism came to an impasse over what constitutes the gospel and what the New Testament church is all about. Worse, this blind alley gave rise to a more monumental question—what is a Christian? The vanguard of new evangelicalism became increasingly mired in this vexing question as it sought cooperation and rapprochement with liberal Protestants and conservative Roman Catholics. *Biblically* the issue boils down to one being either saved or lost, heaven-bound or hell-bound, one of God's people or Satan's. In terms of Scripture there is no mediating position on the definition of a Christian.

When ultimate religious authority cannot be successfully located, the gospel has no sure parameters. When the gospel cannot be precisely defined, what it means to be a Christian cannot be agreed upon. And if the marks of a genuine Christian cannot be construed, then the question of what the Christian church is becomes moot. In liberal

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<sup>62</sup>*Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, p. 49.

Protestantism the church became everyone and, in reality, was no one and thus nondescript. If everyone is a Christian, then no one is a Christian in this amorphous blob of religion. The new evangelicalism appears to be well on its way toward becoming such a conglomerate bereft of true biblical distinctives.

A movement that wants to be called evangelical and yet has to debate itself over what the genius of Christianity actually is, is putting the finishing touches on its own coffin. At this point it seems certain that the new evangelicalism is incapable of self-correction.