

## EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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In recent years we have heard some rather severe statements about the status and quality of evangelical scholarship. While I share some of the concern of those who have issued these condemnations, I have preferred to try to alleviate the problem by contributing positively to the corpus, rather than complaining about it. This is a case of lighting a candle, rather than cursing the darkness.

Having said that, however, I do have some concerns as we look forward into the twenty-first century, and these are concerns about the quality of the scholarship, not the theological conclusions. While some may mistake “concern” for “fear”<sup>1</sup> or even “alarm” and “consternation,”<sup>2</sup> it is important to draw the distinction. Fear is not what leads a sailor to check carefully the rigging of his boat and to obtain a weather briefing before departure. That is concern or caution. Rather, the experience of *fear* of control failure or of dangerous weather is reserved for those who fail to take such precautions. It is not fear that leads a person to have smoke detectors and fire extinguishers in her home. Fear of fire is what may be experienced by those who do not take such precautions. It appears to me, as we face the century into which we have entered, that some sanctified caution is in order, for reasons that I will elaborate further. As I shall explain later, there are times when I am optimistic and times when I am pessimistic, but this may be a time for what psychologist Julie Norem calls “defensive pessimism.”<sup>3</sup>

In addressing this subject, I do not represent myself as some shining paragon of scholarship, but as one who, by virtue of sheer chronological giftedness, has had opportunity to observe the evangelical scene for some time.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 23.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 130. See my *Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 9 for the distinction between “alarmist” and “alertist” thinking that Grenz overlooks.

<sup>3</sup> Julie K. Norem, *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking: Using Defensive Pessimism to Harness Anxiety and Perform at Your Peak* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2002). See also “Coit-Murphy’s Statement on the Power of Negative Thinking”: “It is impossible for an optimist to be pleasantly surprised” (Arthur Bloch, *Murphy’s Law Book Two* [Los Angeles: Price Stern Sloan, 1980] 17).

These are goals toward which I have tried to strive, but have not yet attained. While no one has yet reached the North Star by sailing toward it, it is still a good sight to aim toward. Let's simply call what follows my hopes for the development of evangelical theological scholarship in the twenty-first century. While "I have a hope" does not have quite the ring of "I have a dream," it has the virtue of being more original. To that end, may I share several of those hopes? Nor is any of this new and original. It may sound very familiar to all my readers, in which case, review is often helpful.

Before proceeding, let me respond to your criticisms of this address. With all due apologies to David Letterman, here are the top ten reasons why your criticisms are unfounded:

#10. Because you do not agree with me, you have no right to criticize my ideas.

#9. Your comments reflect a hopelessly obsolete conception. No one thinks that way anymore.

#8a. . . .

#8b. That certainly was a surprising election, wasn't it?

#7. You have ignored a crucial distinction that I draw.

#6. 2 plus 2 equals 4.

#5. I have dealt with that criticism in my groundbreaking article in the *Northwest Kazakhstan Journal of Crypto-Theology*.

#4. How uncivil of you to say such things about an irenic theologian like me.

#3. You are engaged in a personal vendetta against me.

#2. You are a (rationalist, postmodernist, foundationalist, etc.).

#1. You have misquoted and misrepresented me. I don't hold what you have unfairly accused me of.

Now you may be saying, "But we have not even yet criticized your remarks. In fact, we have not even heard what you have to say." That objection, however, is quite irrelevant, at least in the environment that may be coming upon us. In fact, it should also be possible to offer a list of criticisms of the address, even before I deliver it. You may be interested in purchasing one of my "review makers," which come in several models, from the introductory \$9.95 kit to the industrial strength version for \$49.95. A sort of academic LEGO set, it contains all the components to assemble a critique of any book (e.g. the view is either monistic or dualistic, convoluted or simplistic, circular or inconsistent, radical or reactionary, verbose or truncated, etc.). If you believe that the principle that reading a book is a prerequisite to reviewing it is an Enlightenment idea, this is for you. Similarly, I concluded during the last election campaign that I could give a campaign speech, regardless of the office for which I was running, or the identity of my opponent. The core of it is: "My opponent is captive to special interests. I, on the other hand, will work for the good of the people." With the possibility of scholarship becoming politics, something similar should be possible for scholars.

While I address my observations to all members of the Evangelical Theological Society, I especially direct it to the younger members, those less than forty years of age. Those more than sixty years of age have relatively few

years left in their scholarly productive careers. Those in what used to be called middle age before that bracket became populated with baby boomers are relatively settled into their patterns. The youngest group, however, the generation-Xers, have many years remaining, and will certainly live to see at least one major cultural shift. They also are still forming their scholarly habits, and, at least because of their numbers, are the greatest hope of this society. A recent book, which studies the comparative management styles of “geezers” (those over 70 years of age) and “geeks” (those 21–34 years of age), while finding significant differences between the two also reveals that in some respects they have more in common with one another than either has with the generation between them.<sup>4</sup>

We always work within a cultural context. I would like to sketch two opposed facets of our present culture. I see both popular and academic indications of the first of these trends. On the popular level, the Josephson Institute of Ethics has released the results of a recent study that confirmed the findings of several other studies. The researchers found that the percentage of high school students who said they had cheated on an exam at least once in the previous year increased from 61% in 1991 to 71% in 2000 and to 74% in 2002. Those who said they had stolen something from a store rose from 31% in 1991 to 35% in 2000 and 38% in 2002. Those who said they would be willing to lie to get a good job jumped from 28% to 39%. Those who attend private religious schools were less likely to shoplift but more likely to cheat on exams and lie to teachers.<sup>5</sup> If you have wondered why each year your students seem to have longer noses than the previous year’s class, this may be the reason.

On the academic level, it may be helpful to see how several contemporary theories would address the timeless question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

Because power is knowledge, and those with the power to do so declared that the chicken had crossed the road and have used that theory as a means of suppressing the non-road-crossing theory and oppressing those who hold it.

The question seems to assume that there is some absolute answer, true for everyone, everywhere, and at all times. Actually, the answer is a function of the community of which one is a part.

In answering this question we can employ fiction as a means of creating a certain kind of truth.

Let’s try thinking of this in a different way: why did this cowardly, irresponsible fowl, aptly identified as “chicken,” abandon her responsibilities at home to pursue her own security and personal pleasure elsewhere?

While we do not hold to the theory that language mirrors reality, it works out better to believe that the chicken crossed the road than to believe that she did not.

<sup>4</sup> Warren G. Bennis and Robert J. Thomas, *Geeks and Geezers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.josephsoninstitute.org/Survey2002/survey2002–pressrelease.htm>.

Because the twain of the inner has folded back upon the curve of the boundless, and has formed a strand that is ever striving, and yet ever failing, to transcend the limitations of the human psyche.

Personally, if we are to consult philosophers on this question, I much prefer the wisdom of a great popular philosopher:

“Did the chicken cross the road?  
Did she bear a heavy load?  
That she crossed it has been showed,  
But why she crossed it is not knowed.”

A very different cultural development is on a collision course with that one, however. I believe that politics and economics are realms where we can get an early indication of social developments, and there have been some very interesting ones in the last fifteen months, indicating what may well be a developing trend toward belief in the objectivity of truth. These include Americans’ traumatic discovery of the reality of terrorism in the world; the painful awareness that traditional objective measures of stock valuation count; the disclosure that a scientist had fabricated his research findings; the revelation of the lengths to which Dennis Kosloski had gone to evade paying taxes; the outrage over the business practices of corporations like Worldcom and Enron and of “creative accounting” that reduced the Big Five of accounting firms to four. A public that legally required the CEOs of major corporations to certify the accuracy of their company’s financial statements will not indefinitely tolerate students lying and cheating, or the type of answers given above to the chicken question. It will expect intellectual integrity of scholars, regardless of whether they expect it of themselves. At some point, this public backlash will mean that our scholarly claims will also come under suspicion and scrutiny, and they ought to, just as the late 1980s saw the public turn upon the popular and well-known televangelists. Painful as that time was, it had a purifying effect.

Of course, someone of a more postmodern orientation may feel that concern about these trends is evidence of “unrepentant modernism” or even “enlightenment mentality.” Remember reason #2 above, which I term “the labeling response.” If you are thinking that way, I strongly encourage you to stop doing so. Actually, postmodernism is rejecting more than that, including what premodernism has in common with modernism. Examine Augustine’s dispute with the Pelagians, Thomas’s disagreements with his opponents, Luther’s debate with Erasmus, or any of countless other theological disputations, and you will see the demand for objective truth.

## I. THE QUALITY OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

A first hope of mine is that as evangelicals we will set high our standards of excellence, both in scholarship and in education. At times we evangelicals have had a sort of inferiority complex in relationship to more liberal scholars. Some of that was unjustified, and perhaps resulted from an ignoring of evangelicals by mainline groups. We need to understand that no position is

somehow inherently more scholarly, an assumption sometimes conveyed. This myth has begun to be punctured by the visible presence of evangelicals in academic societies, and Thomas Oden has spoken of discovering “among brilliant Protestant evangelicals a superb quality of exegesis.”<sup>6</sup>

While not making liberal or secular scholarship our standard, we will, however, want to make sure that we not only equal but exceed it. One of my proudest moments as a seminary dean came during a coffee break conversation at our board meeting. One of those board members was the associate dean for administration of the graduate school of one of the Big Ten universities. He said to me, “Most of your faculty could qualify as tenured faculty members at a Big Ten university.” While our goal may not be to play in the “big leagues,” it is good to know that we could, if we chose.

That means that we must keep firm standards, for our students and for ourselves. The scandal of grade inflation is well known, and is not restricted to Christian schools. One professor at Harvard has begun assigning each student two grades. One is the grade that appears on the student’s official record, and is commensurate with the grades given by others, so that the student is not penalized for taking this professor’s class. The other is what he thinks the student really earned. He gives the former grade; he awards the latter. I hope this practice will spread.

Some temptations are peculiar to us evangelicals, however. Because our institutions are not of the size and complexity of major universities, we are tempted to seek to create the illusion of similarity by “title inflation.” I have written of this more extensively elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> but I mean the tendency to call colleges universities, departments schools headed by deans rather than chairpersons, academic heads of colleges with only one real school within them provosts, and presidents emeriti chancellors. Nowadays, if you are not a dean, coordinator, director or chairperson, you are nobody, because everyone has some such title. Yet as someone said, “when everybody is somebody, then nobody is anybody.” One governmental unit even has, believe it or not, “associate deputy vice directors” of some departments! One friend of mine, when approached about an administrative position, declined to be considered for what he privately termed “king of nothing”—a large title for a small job.

We need to look closely at what inflation is, however. The popular understanding of inflation is that it is an increase in the price of goods and services, or perhaps, conversely, a decline in the value (purchasing power) of money. The dictionary definition of inflation, however, is “an increase in the volume of money and credit relative to available goods *resulting* in a substantial and continuing rise in the general price level.”<sup>8</sup> What we think of as inflation is actually the result of inflation, which is too much money.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 29.

<sup>7</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Postmodern World: Discerning the Times and the Spirit of Our Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002) 26–27.

<sup>8</sup> *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1976) 591. Emphasis added.

Whether too many As being awarded, too many high-sounding titles, or too many schools offering advanced degrees, relative to the reality, the result is the same—the cheapening of the grade, title, or degree, and this affects the regard in which even those of genuine excellence are held. We need to be sure the quality is increased, not the labels.

A second hope is that evangelical theological scholarship will be increasingly characterized by primary research and originality. My concern here is not primarily about what is often termed plagiarism. Not that such is never a problem, as I discovered years ago while serving as an associate editor for an ill-fated theological encyclopedia. This is quite rare, however. For most of us, the problem is no more serious than failure to use quotation marks about a word or two, in a context where we have made clear the source, or perhaps inability to realize that we were first exposed to a particular idea by someone whom we read long ago.

I am more concerned that we avoid what I would term “secondary plagiarism,” which is simply undue reliance on secondary sources. It is certainly legitimate to utilize secondary sources, as a tentative and preliminary guide to the primary sources, but to use them as a substitute for the primary sources may be hazardous to one’s scholarly health (ethics professors will recognize my appeal here as the enlightened self-interest argument). Just as the biblical text sheds a lot of light on the commentaries, we should make sure that the primary sources have priority in our research. I think of an error that accidentally slipped into a footnote of one of my books. Somehow, through sheer concatenation of circumstances, a noted evangelical scholar, in a book written several years after mine, repeated the exact error I had made! We will not want to rest our reputations upon translators, either, both with respect to the biblical text and the writings of others. I wanted to use a dramatic quotation from Martin Luther, which I have found in several sources, one of them by a scholar at an Ivy League university. Upon checking the German text in the *Weimarer Ausgabe*, however, I discovered that while the same general thought was in the original, the colorful imagery was apparently a product of the imagination of the translator.

My third hope is that the evangelical theological scholarship of the twenty-first century will adequately argue its assertions. One of my graduate school professors who had the strongest influence on me was a philosopher, Eliseo Vivas, at Northwestern University. One of his favorite comments was, “Is very nice theory; only one thing wrong—no evidence.” It was his way of pounding into us the idea that plausibility of a thesis is not sufficient; it must be adequately supported by the relevant evidence. He was an academic version of Sergeant Joe Friday of the old *Dragnet* television series, whose favorite words seemed to be, “Just the facts, ma’am.”

This means that, if we believe in a correspondence theory of truth, and I have argued elsewhere that on a pre-reflective level everyone does,<sup>9</sup> we must be prepared to offer appropriate support for our contentions. It is in-

<sup>9</sup> *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Peril of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) 234–37.

sufficient for a theory simply to sound appealing. A literary work may be completely internally consistent and coherent, and still be a work of fiction. In fact, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction suggests a rather basic commitment of our culture to a correspondence view.

If scholarship were politics, then persuasion would take place simply by repetition. So, on the first statement of an assertion, it is conceivable. The second time, it is possible. The third time, it is plausible. The fourth time, it becomes probable. The fifth time, it is true. All of this progression may occur without any enhancement of the factual support for the assertion. That may be how politics operates, but it will not do if we claim that what we are doing is scholarship.

In particular, we need to watch our historiography carefully. We live in a day in which Michel Foucault acknowledged that he was doing “fictive” history,<sup>10</sup> and in which there is a “new historicism” that William Dean has described in his aptly-named book, *History Making History*.<sup>11</sup> I know of at least one denomination that is rewriting its history to justify certain current trends. In its bluntest form, this has been expressed as, “Don’t let a good theory be spoiled by a few facts.” John Woodbridge’s masterful critique of the Rogers-McKim thesis is a good example of what I am recommending as an antidote,<sup>12</sup> and Paul Helseth’s recent *JETS* article attempts something similar on a more modest scale.<sup>13</sup> In the words of the late Bernard Baruch: “Everyone is entitled to his opinion; no one has a right to be wrong about the facts.”

This means, however, fourth, that my hope includes evangelical scholarship working with increasing competence in logic, and especially inductive logic. Most of our contentions cannot simply be settled by a one point consideration, or a deduction from indubitable premises, as would be the case in classical foundationalism. Rather, we must make some estimation of just how much evidence is required for a thesis to be considered confirmed. Consequently, we must think in terms of probabilities or correlations, rather than absolute proof.

Failure to realize this has often led to a false idea of refutation as well. One sometimes hears a triumphant declaration of a problem in an opposing view. Unfortunately, however, this is seldom very persuasive, for in the nature of the case, even the strongest hypothesis will have negative considerations to deal with.

I am not suggesting that there is no such thing as absolute truth. It is one thing, however, to say that we have absolute truth; it is quite another to claim that we know it absolutely, or with absolute certainty. The ontology

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori/Michel Foucault* (trans. R. James Goldstein and James Cascaito; New York: Semiotext[e], 1991) 32–33.

<sup>11</sup> William Dean, *History Making History: The New Historicism in American Religious Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

<sup>12</sup> John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Paul Kjos Helseth, “‘Re-imagining’ the Princeton Mind: Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism,” *JETS* 45 (2002) 427–50.

does not guarantee the epistemology. If, however, epistemological absolutism is not a practical possibility in the matters we deal with in theological scholarship, then two implications follow.

One is that a certain degree of humility or tentativeness should accompany our advocacy of our conclusions. If our evidence is only partial, then we should reckon with the possibility that at some future point the balance of the cumulative evidence may shift, and we should be prepared to modify our conclusions accordingly. Second, we should be prepared to recognize and acknowledge difficulties and counter-evidences to our own position. I become suspicious when I hear someone claim that absolutely every relevant biblical text supports his view, or, conversely, to claim victory over a competing view on the basis of a single item of counter-evidence. I appreciate hearing a scholar say something like, "Of the 30 relevant cases (or texts), 24 support my view, four are ambiguous, and two, frankly, seem at present to be irreconcilable with my position." To try to force all of the evidence onto a Procrustean bed in order to attempt to win our case will subject us to disrespect and even ridicule. While it is not possible to quantify very precisely, we need to think in terms of one theory having a B+ grade, versus an alternative view earning a B-.

Fifth, I hope that evangelical scholars will become more aware of their own presuppositions. We often interpret a bit of data, even a differing view, through our own unconscious assumptions. Frequently we even state the terms of the discussion from our own perspective. To fail to realize that this is how we see it because of our presuppositions is to doom us to confusion and erroneous interpretation from the very beginning. Most of us are much better at identifying others' presuppositions and the influence of those upon their thought than at recognizing and acknowledging the same about ourselves.

Sixth, I also hope that evangelical scholarship will increase the precision of its thinking, both in terms of understanding and of expression. I find that in the present time of rather imprecise thinking, I sometimes have to be extraordinarily explicit, to make clear to readers that "little or no" does not mean "none at all," and that to say that "I am not sure that q is true," does not mean that I believe q to be false. This is in part a matter of remembering the difference between contradictories and contraries. If I affirm that "All A is X," the contrary is "No A is X," but "Some A is not X" is its contradictory. There can be several contradictories to an absolute statement, several intermediate positions between it and its contrary. Thus, "one A is not X," "several A's are not X," "many A's are not X," "most A's are not X," etc., are all contradictories of "All A is X." "Some A is X" and "Some A is not X," on the other hand, are sub-contraries. Establishing the truth of one does not refute the other subcontrary. This kind of concern is not merely "scholasticism" or "rationalism." My undergraduate adviser, Paul Holmer, a devotee of Søren Kierkegaard, said in class one day, "Belief in paradox is no excuse for logical inconsistency."

Now what is the point of all of this? Sometimes I see absolute or universal statements, like "All A is X," criticized by showing that some A is not X.

It should not, however, be assumed that “No A is X” has been verified thereby. In order to establish the contrary, it is necessary to present positive argumentation.

Another facet of this precision and clarity requires continuing growth in conceptual discrimination, by which I mean, the ability to comprehend fine distinctions of concepts. If I have difficulty understanding what is being said or discover what appears to be a contradiction, I should not simply assume that the writer is confused or self-contradictory. I should instead ask whether there is a distinction that I am missing, or an idea unfamiliar to me, making me unable to recognize what it meant. We need to emphasize this endeavor. So, for example, before speaking of “idealism,” one might profitably read Edgar Sheffield Brightman’s description of the four types of idealism,<sup>14</sup> and references to “pragmatism” should be made from the context of familiarity with Arthur Lovejoy’s “The Thirteen Pragmatisms.”<sup>15</sup>

Let’s put this in a different setting to try to clarify the point. Imagine a person who is familiar with the color purple. If he encounters someone who says that this obviously purple object is not purple, it is lavender or perhaps lilac, the second person will appear to him to be confused, incoherent, or simply wrong. What is needed, however, is a refinement of his conceptuality to include the fine variations of colors.

I am convinced that much of the misunderstanding that goes on in theological discussions is a result of insufficient conceptual sophistication. Combined with such sophistication needs to be conceptual empathy. By that I mean the ability to understand or think oneself into the concepts of another, even if one does not agree with them. To fail to do so will result in misunderstanding and errant evaluation. Much of what seems to be unfair criticism is actually a case of lack of conceptual sophistication and empathy. I think of a reviewer who argued that I had shifted to the right, from evangelicalism into fundamentalism, by seeking to show that in my 1997 *Evangelical Left* I had criticized the use of other authorities besides Scripture, whereas in my 1983 *Christian Theology* I had commended the use of reason, experience, and tradition.<sup>16</sup>

There were several minor problems in the contention, such as attributing to me statements of two others reported in the book,<sup>17</sup> and apparently considering *sola Scriptura* a distinctive of twentieth-century fundamentalism. More significantly, the reviewer failed to observe that in the 1998 second edition of *Christian Theology*, available at the time he wrote, I took the same position as in the first edition.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Sheffield Brightman, “The Definition of Idealism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 30 (1933) 429–35.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy, “The Thirteen Pragmatisms,” *Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1908) 29–39.

<sup>16</sup> James Leo Garrett, Jr., “Review of *The Evangelical Left*,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 42 (1999) 91–92.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. with his references on p. 92 my statements on p. 29 of *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), citing Roger Olson, and on p. 47, citing Stanley Grenz.

<sup>18</sup> *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 216–21.

He also, unfortunately, overlooked the distinction I draw between the “legislative authority” and the “judicial authority,” although a more careful reading should have made that apparent.<sup>19</sup> Another theologian, who uses “sources” and “norms” of theology interchangeably, then cited him to support the same contention, thereby also illustrating the hazard of reliance on a secondary source.<sup>20</sup> There are, of course, distinctions without differences, like Thomas Morris’s illustration of the ability to lift a blue two-ounce pencil and the ability to lift a yellow two-ounce pencil,<sup>21</sup> but we must be sure we do not conclude too soon that we are dealing with such.

My concern extends to increasing precision in the use of language. The same professor who insisted on evidence used to refer to the “coefficient of elasticity of words.” By this he meant the tendency to stretch the use of words to cover broader and broader denotations. Eventually, they come to refer to so much that very little is excluded, and thus very little is actually being expressed by them. Remember, after all, that the word “definition” involves giving a finite meaning to a term. I am not trying to argue that an idea must continue to be held simply because it is old. I am, however, suggesting that, for the sake of communication, it would be desirable that, when the usage of a term has changed greatly from its original denotation, a different word be used, a modifying adjective be added, or that by some other means the revised meaning be clearly identified. Failure to do so is like moving from one house to a different one some distance away, but continuing to use the original address.

## II. THE STYLE OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

It is important not only that the quality of theological scholarship be excellent, but that the endeavor be carried on in the right style or tone. In this connection another hope of mine is that evangelical scholars will keep in mind the nature of scholarly exchange and debate. There sometimes is a tendency to see such in personal terms, rather than in terms of the issues. This is particularly a problem with the approach fostered by Michel Foucault, who institutionalized the *ad hominem* argument.<sup>22</sup> The struggle over ideas should be an endeavor to determine the truth, not an exercise of power over another person. After a very competitive athletic contest or a political debate one can often observe opponents greeting one another, shaking hands, and even embracing. Opponents are not enemies. The nature of political

<sup>19</sup> *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 1.256–58; cf. *Christian Theology* (2d ed.) 282–84.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 118–34. An indication of his equating of these two concepts is his *Revising Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 88–93. For a more traditional distinction between sources and norms, see e.g. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (2d. ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986) 21.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991) 79.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (ed. Colin Gordon; New York: Pantheon, 1980) 193.

debate and theological debate should be over issues, not persons. Certain principles, if borne in mind, may help us preserve the right understanding and practice.

One important principle for evangelical scholars to bear in mind is what I term the principle of reciprocal difference. By that I mean that if A is not-B, then B is also not-A. That may seem like an obvious and logical principle, but on the existential level it is sometimes overlooked. If A criticizes B from his own position of A, then it is logical to assume that B will also criticize A from the perspective of B, and A ought to expect this. It simply is not appropriate to reply by claiming that there is no difference between the two, if one has previously insisted that they are different. It is, of course, possible that on the specific point on which A criticized B, they do differ, but that on the specific point on which B is criticizing A, they do not, but that is not the type of situation I have in mind. I am simply insisting that we recognize that the process of academic debate is a matter of give and take, and that we be prepared to play the game that way. In all the years that I have been writing, I have made a point of never writing to someone who has written a negative review of one of my books, and please be assured, there have been some obviously unenlightened and confused reviewers. I have occasionally dropped a note of appreciation to someone who has been unusually generous, complimenting him on such obvious insight and good judgment, but I have let the negative comments go by, even if I thought they were unfair or had misunderstood. It has seemed to me to be wise to use here the principle recommended for dealing with aggressive drivers, FIDO: forget it; drive on. Lately, however, I have discovered that some evangelicals are quite defensive about their writings.

These complaints about being criticized seem to be increasing. At times, one even gets the impression that it is somehow improper even to criticize certain views. There is nothing wrong with criticism. That goes with the territory. To raise questions about the cogency of one's argument is not to deliberately exclude that view, or to reject the person. All of us have a certain amount of attachment to our ideas, but we need to understand that criticisms of them are not personal attacks upon us.

The other facet of this is what I term the "bob and weave." Some skilled boxers are able to stand and throw a punch, and then when a punch is thrown at them, they move either vertically or horizontally so that when the other boxer's fist arrives, they are not where they previously were. This is a valuable technique in boxing, but it is undesirable in theological or any other kind of debate. To seek to avoid criticism by shifting one's position in accordance with where the criticism is coming from is a questionable practice from the standpoint of integrity. While avoidance of criticism is legitimate, evasion is not, something like the difference between income tax avoidance, a legitimate and wise practice, and income tax evasion, which is illegal. While the bob and weave may spare us the short-term effects of a criticism, it will eventually undermine our credibility.

Second, I hope that we will also grow in our ability to differ irenically. The choice of language goes a long way toward establishing the tone of the

conversation. The connotations of words are so very important. I hope that evangelicalism will be spared from what I term “ironic irenicism.” A friend sent me a copy of an e-mail he had sent to a person who labeled himself an “irenic and moderate evangelical.” In this e-mail my friend quoted some of this other person’s language, taken from an open letter: “triumphal entry of fundamentalist leader Jerry Falwell into the SBC,” “fundamentalist take over of the SBC,” “demagoguery,” “hyper-conservative, control-oriented take over,” “take over of the denomination,” “SBC fundamentalist take over,” “tactics of demagoguery,” “spirit of fear and strife that comes disguised as passion for truth.” My friend then simply asked the author of those words, “irenic?” Or I think of a letter I received from a former professor of mine, in which he referred to some third persons as “goose-stepping fundamentalists” characterized by “rigidity of locked minds.” Here, as is often the case, it is primarily the adjectives that cause the problem. One difficulty with such language is that it generates more heat than light.

The spirit of our time reinforces such practices. I once posted on a denominational web page an open letter to the chairman of a group whose name included “committed to civility.” That person then complained on the web page that I had not first sent him a personal copy of the letter, a deserved criticism for which I apologized in a personal letter. Then, however, without my permission or knowledge, he faxed that personal letter to a third party—all in the name of “civility.” Suppose I had added to my reason #4, “How uncivil of you to say such things about an irenic theologian like me,” the words, “you arrogant, ignorant, closed-minded bigot,” and added to the list another reason, “You are a theological Osama bin Laden, rallying your al Qaeda followers for a terrorist attack on the twin towers of theological orthodoxy and rational thought.” Would that have advanced the pursuit of truth, or enhanced your estimation of me? What if I referred to those who consider the doctrinal basis of our society too vague, as “exclusionary control freaks, engaged in witchhunts,” and those concerned about theological boundaries being drawn too tightly as “limitophobic” or “paranoid”? The reputation damaged by the use of such language, or by comparing one’s opponent to some notorious character, is that of the person using the language, not the person referred to, because it reveals more about the author of the statement than about its object.

This is not to say that there is no value in a hermeneutic of suspicion, in understanding the motivation behind a given action or a certain statement, but that does not determine its truth or falsity. And there is a sense in which, in certain contexts, one must make another live or die by the sword of that other person’s own methodology. This is simply a matter of insisting upon auto-referentiality, just as the sociology of knowledge is a discipline to which the sociology of knowledge must also be applied.

I was taught that one first tries to describe a view as objectively and fairly as possible, then moves on to analysis, and finally, to evaluation. The use of language in a rhetorically rather than logically oriented context may mean that descriptive terms are used with connotations that actually tend to influence the response subtly. The German language has different forms

of indirect discourse, one of which simply reports what was said, and one that subtly questions the truth of the statement. We do not have that syntactical nuance in English. Instead, we do it by the choice of words, especially the adjectives and the verbs, or, in speech, by tone of voice or non-verbal communication. I propose that we be careful to reserve evaluation for the evaluative section of our treatment rather than smuggling it into the exposition or the analysis. Stipulative definitions and question-begging are more egregious forms of this problem.

This means that the way an issue is stated will be very important. In politics, every effort is made to state an issue in the fashion most favorable to one's position. Suppose I asked you this: "Is it fair that just 1% of American tax payers should get 15% of the tax reduction, that just 10% should get 30%, while 50% of taxpayers get only 3% of the tax cut? Is this tax giveaway right, in which money is taken from the poor and given to the rich?" Then suppose I worded it this way instead: "Is it fair that the top 1% of taxpayers, who pay 37% of all income taxes, should get only 15% of the tax reduction, that the top 10% of taxpayers, who pay 67% of all income taxes, should get only 30% of the tax cut, while the bottom 50% of taxpayers, who pay only 4% of the income taxes, should get 3% of the tax cut?"<sup>23</sup> Would you tend to react any differently to the two questions? Remember that Richard Rorty has said that "anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being re-described,"<sup>24</sup> and that Stanley Fish says, "Getting hold of the concept of merit and stamping it with your own brand is a good strategy."<sup>25</sup> "Push-polling," in which a question is deliberately stated in such a way as to evoke a certain response, is considered ethically questionable even in politics.

Third, I also hope that we will be willing to state openly and clearly our convictions. One of the problems that surfaced in the fundamentalist-modernist controversy was the liberals' tendency to use old words with new meanings, without calling attention to that shift, which the humanist John Herman Randall said approached actual hypocrisy.<sup>26</sup> There also was an effort to conceal one's actual beliefs. One of the things I appreciate most about my friend Clark Pinnock is that he will always tell you exactly what he believes on a given doctrine or intellectual issue at that time, or to use his expression, "put the cards on the table." This is the "transparency" the public is now demanding from corporations. I suggest this is a practice that all of us should emulate. Until about ten years ago, I had never encountered what appeared to be deliberate withholding of access to research material, or political or psychological pressure to abstain from publishing one's findings.

<sup>23</sup> *The Kiplinger Tax Letter* 77/23 (Nov. 8, 2002) 4.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 7.

<sup>25</sup> Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 6.

<sup>26</sup> John Herman Randall, Jr., *The Making of the Modern Mind* (Boston: HoughtonMifflin, 1940) 542.

If we expect others to state their views openly, we must allow them to do so. In an age in which power is knowledge, we may well expect to encounter situations in which, rather than the free exchange of ideas and arguments, effort is made simply to drown out opposing voices. That was done to the U. S. Secretary of health and human services, Tommy Thompson, when he attempted to speak to a conference on AIDS in Madrid this past July. Gay activists simply prevented the attendees from hearing what he had to say. One reason I prefer *Washington Week in Review* to *The Capital Gang* or *The McLaughlin Group* is because its panelists allow one another to speak without interruption. While this may seem far-fetched in our circles, John Sailhamer will recall the Sunday evening that he and I attempted to present both sides of a particular issue at a local church and for the first time in our careers encountered hecklers from a local Christian college. Let me state this clearly and emphatically: to discover and state a scholar's actual views is not unloving, unchristian, unfair, or illegitimate. It is not an attack upon the person. It is simply how the marketplace of ideas is supposed to operate.

What about drawing the valid implications of another person's view? Is that improper? Suppose someone espouses the idea that a given triangle is a right angle triangle, on a surface of zero curvature, and that the two sides adjoining the right angle are three and four meters in length, but denies that he holds that the hypotenuse is five meters in length? Is it improper and unfair, or a misrepresentation of the person's view, to propose that his position implies that the hypotenuse is actually five meters long? I would encourage us to think long and hard about our answer to that question, and especially about the implications of whichever answer we give for the whole process of academic discourse.

It is important, however, to distinguish between logical consistency and systemic consistency. By logical consistency I mean simply not holding propositions that contradict one another, and accepting all members of the set of propositions logically entailed by the basic principles held. Systemic consistency, on the other hand, means holding all of the propositions that a given system of thought has traditionally contained. Denying or rejecting one of these propositions is only logically inconsistent or incoherent if that proposition is logically implied by one of the other propositions in the system or by a more basic principle from which these other propositions flow.

I also have a hope that we will take into account our contemporary culture in the way we package our ideas. I am not referring to what we believe, the content of the doctrines, but how they are expressed. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that the article was the written medium of the "encyclopedists," his rough equivalent for what we would call modernism, and that the lecture was the oral equivalent of the article.<sup>27</sup> Yet I sometimes hear postmodernism presented, even on the popular level, by a very modern medium, the lecture, rather than by a narrative or other postmodern technique. I term this "paradoxical postmodernism." I recall a pro-postmodern evangelical flatly

<sup>27</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) 32-33.

dismissing the idea of the use of sound bites in contemporary sermons. We need not compromise the biblical content by altering the form in which we express it. Before we too quickly dismiss the use of narrative, drama, parables, case studies, and metaphors, we might ask how Jesus' preaching would fare under the application of that criterion.

I also hope that we will be diligent in the application of the principle of auto-referentiality, by which I mean applying to our own work the same standards and criticisms that we apply to that of others. I am indebted to Douglas Groothuis for the insight that Jesus' statement about removing the speck from one's brother's eye while tolerating the presence of a plank in one's own eye is a genuinely philosophical principle with wider application.<sup>28</sup> I think of this when I hear persons argue that knowledge is conditioned, but state their own positions without any hint of this conditioning.<sup>29</sup> I propose that we as evangelical theological scholars take a pledge something like this:

I will not point out the presuppositions of another's position without acknowledging that I have presuppositions myself.

I will not contend that another's view is historically conditioned without conceding that mine is also.

I will be more concerned not to misunderstand or misrepresent others' views than to claim that mine has been misunderstood or misrepresented.

I will be more concerned that my language be fair and objective than I am that others' language about me may not be.

I will not caricature my opponent's view to make my own appear more moderate.

I will not employ *ad hominem* arguments.

I will abstain from the use of pejorative language.

I will not impute motives or emotions to others.

I will think of intellectual arguments in terms of differences over ideas, not as personal disputes.

My final hope regarding style is that we evangelical scholars will see our endeavor more as ministry than as career. By that I mean that we are seeking to advance the cause of Christ, the work of the kingdom, not our own personal professional standing. Those of you who were colleagues or prospective colleagues of mine between 1984 and 1992 know how highly I emphasized team play versus personal agendas. We borrowed a famous football coach's slogan: "We is bigger than me." This means that my teaching and my writing should not be calculated as to what will be most beneficial and expedient for me personally but in terms of what is for the good of Christ's kingdom. The distinction is something like a politician voting on the basis of what is good for society, rather than what will be likelier to get him or her re-elected, or elected to a higher office. I sometimes ask myself how important it is that I get credit for what I do. Would I be willing to publish my work anonymously or pseudonymously? If my answer is "no," then whom

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *On Jesus* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003) 58–59.

<sup>29</sup> I have proposed a procedure for dealing with and reducing one's conditionedness in *Truth or Consequences* 241–42.

am I really serving? This may seem strange or foreign in our day. I was impressed by Tom Brokaw's observation regarding "the greatest generation," that virtually to a person they did not consider themselves heroes.<sup>30</sup> Contrast that with the braggadocio of today's entertainers and athletes.

### III. THE STRATEGY OF EVANGELICAL SCHOLARSHIP

My hope is that evangelical scholarship in the twenty-first century will carefully think through a strategy for its task. Sometimes we have been good at the tactics, the small actions of the task, but not so good at the strategy, working the big picture, of scholarship. In my judgment, this involves several factors.

First, we probably need to begin with some understanding of what we are referring to by the term "evangelicalism." Some of our good Christian terms have become sufficiently broadened that we have difficulty using them. A perfectly good biblical term like "born again," for example, is now used to designate an athlete who has made a comeback, perhaps at a new position or with a different team. It also is applied to politicians who revive seemingly dead careers, sometimes changing parties in the process. I thought I had heard the limits of the term "evangelical" during a roast for Donald Bloesch, in which one professor identified himself as "a liberal evangelical," and another, a self-professed process theologian, referred to himself as "an evangelical liberal." Then, however, I saw an article by Martin Miller of the Los Angeles Times entitled "Evangelical Atheists Need to Learn Civility."<sup>31</sup> Some of us have seriously considered refraining from calling ourselves evangelicals and simply using an expression like "conservative biblical Christian." If evangelicalism were an official organization, like the Democratic Party or the Roman Catholic Church, we could identify it by designation. Hearing the expression, "card-carrying evangelical," I have examined my considerable collection of membership cards, and concluded that I must not be one. Definition will have to be by denotation, by the content of the idea.

I suggest we examine the complexity of evangelicalism. Although I disagreed with him at the time, I have come to accept the contention of my doctoral mentor, William Hordern, that four elements contributed to early twentieth-century American evangelicalism: orthodoxy, pietism, Puritanism, and revivalism.

Evangelicalism has several components. It has a doctrinal component, a web of convictions that constitute the context within which the life of the believer functions. It has a spiritual element, a form of piety that begins with an experience of regeneration and involves a continuing personal relationship with God. It has an ethical element, a commitment to a life of purity in accordance with God's revealed will, and ultimately, of conformity to his very character. It has an evangelistic element, the fulfillment of Christ's

<sup>30</sup> Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Delta, 2001) 103.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Miller, "Evangelical Atheists Need to Learn Civility," *Star Tribune Newspaper of the Twin Cities* (July 4, 2002) A21.

commission to tell others the good news of salvation and to win them to a decision to accept the savior.

My point is this: evangelicalism, historically, has involved all four of these elements. If any of these elements is missing, a church may call itself evangelical, but it really is not, at least not in the sense that term has borne historically. While various streams of evangelicalism may emphasize more strongly one or two of these than does another stream, they are still members of the family, just as various members of a human family vary in certain respects, but have certain resemblances. It is these different blends of these elements that give evangelicalism its great variety.

Are there limits to evangelicalism in each of these elements? It might help to ask questions such as the following. Would we consider a person an evangelical who practiced dishonesty in business dealings and saw nothing wrong with these practices for a Christian? Would we consider a group to be evangelical that made no effort to evangelize, never announced the importance of making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ, and taught that Christians should not attempt to convince unbelievers to accept him? Would we consider someone evangelical who considered prayer unnecessary? And would we consider someone an evangelical who believed that Jesus was simply a fine human being?

I recommend that we not restrict our definition of evangelicalism to simply one or two of these elements. I further suggest that we discuss what the boundaries of denotation are in each of these areas. There will naturally be some disagreement as to where those limits fall, but those who feel that they are being drawn in the wrong place should suggest alternative locations of the limits, unless they are prepared to declare that there should not be any limits at all.

I also suggest that we not exclude from evangelicalism those whose particular distribution of emphasis is different from ours. There are revivalistic evangelicals, doctrinaire evangelicals, socially activist evangelicals, devotional evangelicals, and ascetic evangelicals, and each needs the other, just as Paul emphasized that each part of the body needs the other (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:1–31). The problem comes when we insist that everyone should make one of these factors the major one, a tendency not unlike a single-dimensional definition of evangelicalism. We should not be surprised if the primary discussions within this society relate to the doctrinal boundaries. This is, after all, the Evangelical Theological Society, not the Evangelical Ethical Society, the Evangelical Worship Society, or the Evangelical Evangelistic Society. In those societies, the discussion would focus upon something else.

What I have said about defining evangelicalism here has been primarily a matter of American evangelicalism. To think that Americans, or North Americans, speak for all of evangelicalism, however, is terribly narrow. We need to recognize that the real momentum in conservative biblical Christianity is currently in the third world and is increasing. I have been impressed with the strength and vitality of Christianity I have observed in Asia, South America, Africa, and Eastern Europe. Some of those Christians

would consider some Euro-American evangelicalism an anomaly. See for example, Philip Jenkins's book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*.<sup>32</sup>

We may need new imagery for conceptualizing evangelicalism. We have heard a fair amount of late, both by members of this society and non-members, about the center of evangelicalism. One cannot determine the center of anything, however, without knowing its boundaries, or at least its shape. A quick and rough way of determining whether one is in the center of anything is the old soldier's means of determining his location on a battlefield: if the shots (in this case, criticisms) are coming from both directions, you are somewhere in the middle. I propose instead the idea of the center of gravity. The center of gravity of a solid object may not be located at the spatial center. It is extremely important, however, for it affects the stability of that object. A vehicle whose center of gravity is too high will be susceptible to rollovers in turns, a problem that besets some popular SUVs, and an airplane whose center of gravity is outside the weights and balances envelope will be uncontrollable. Another analogy might be that we think of the center of evangelicalism not as a mean but as a median, so that extremes do not unbalance the movement. And we probably also should avoid a bi-modal distribution, which will tend to alternate between the two modes.

This leads me to my next and second point about strategy. I also hope that evangelical theological scholarship will become broader culturally in the years ahead. Contrary to the impression you might get from reading the article in *Christianity Today*, I did not "withhold my signature" from the statement of "The Word Made Fresh."<sup>33</sup> I simply was never approached about signing it. Had I been, however, I would have expressed my misgivings about the implicit cultural boundary the document seemed to draw. Very few minority or third world persons' signatures were attached to the document. I find some contemporary evangelicalism remarkably Euro-American in its orientation, and quite Anglo, middle-class, and male as well. Having invested a considerable amount of time in attempting to recruit minority professors, I know how difficult that can be. Yet we may need to go out of our way to cultivate these persons from American minorities and from third world countries. I was pleased, for example, to find at last year's meeting at least one Belgian and one Russian, both of whom I had met in St. Petersburg, Russia, a month earlier. The executive committee has voted to establish an annual scholarship to enable at least one non-American to attend ETS each year, preferably as a plenary speaker. We all, including third world people, read the Scriptures through our own cultural eyes, but at least the possibility of our becoming aware of our own presuppositions is improved if we rub elbows with those of different cultures. And this concern extends to

<sup>32</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, "Theologians Decry 'Narrow' Boundaries," *Christianity Today* 45/7 (June 10, 2002) 18.

women scholars, who are present in increasing numbers in our society, and who may have some insights that males have overlooked.

Third, one of my greatest hopes for evangelical scholarship is that it will be forward-looking. I think of three quotations from non-theological realms that illustrate what I am referring to. When asked about the secret of his success, Wayne Gretzky, the “great one” of hockey, said, “Other players skate to where the puck is; I skate to where the puck is going to be.” Bill Russell, in a TV ad, discussed his rebounding success as an NBA basketball player by saying, “I knew the player’s favorite thing to do. I knew his least favorite thing to do. I got most of my rebounds before the other player took his shot.” A Federal Aviation Administration safety seminar instructor urged the pilots present to look over the terrain of an airport, especially an unfamiliar one, so that we could select the best spot for an emergency landing in the event of engine failure on takeoff. He said, “your most important decisions about what to do in the air you will make while still on the ground.”

By looking forward, I am not proposing that we change the content of our belief to fit the dominant cultural milieu. I do mean, however, that we should be aware of the issues and problems, not just of the past, but also of the present, and even of the future. The difficulty is that today’s solutions are often tomorrow’s problems. Unfortunately, I find that what are sometimes presented as new and creative evangelical ideas are actually warmed over ideas borrowed from those of a broader orientation, and in many cases already abandoned by them. With the theme of our 2003 meeting being “Jesus,” for example, I would not be surprised to hear a paper arguing that the idea of Jesus’ two natures is a product of Greek thinking (shades of Adolf Harnack) and that Christology should be done in terms of what Jesus did rather than what he was (warming the heart of Oscar Cullmann).

I think of a book I recently read that claimed by its title to be prophetic regarding the direction of evangelicalism, but some of whose chapters were quite dated, making no mention of some of the most significant recent representatives of the view it was criticizing. I am not suggesting that one must adopt the latest idea, but one should at least be familiar with it. Discussions of “the Greek and biblical views” that ignore the work of James Barr, Martin Hengel, and Brevard Childs; post-foundationalisms that make no mention of the work of William Alston, Robert Audi, and Timm Triplett; defenses of the truth of Christianity that do not take into account the ideas of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Richard Rorty simply are not acceptable. One need not agree with these scholars, but one cannot responsibly fail to interact with them. Answer number 8a above (the answer of silence) will not do, nor will 8b, the statement of irrelevant truths.

Part of our difficulty is because we are too strongly affected by our background experiences. Because something was a problem when we were younger and more formative, that issue colors our future perception. It becomes a case of “everything looks like a nail, when you have a hammer in your hand.” Because I had some real legalists in the first congregation I served, I may spend my time fighting legalism and overlooking the opposite problem. Because as pastor I had to deal with the problems caused by a

rather radical type of Pentecostalism on the part of a few that threatened to disintegrate that inner-city Chicago congregation, I may become blind to the danger of allowing rather little opportunity for the working of the Holy Spirit.

How, then, can we anticipate the future? One clue can be detected by watching other disciplines. As Francis Schaeffer correctly pointed out, cultural trends move through various disciplines and finally arrive at theology last.<sup>34</sup> That is why it is so important to observe what is going on in the popular culture. Try to watch current prime time network television sometime, preferably on an empty stomach, and ask what this signals for the context in which we do theology. I have increasingly come to conclude that history, economics, and political science are good guides to understanding group behavior. Some of you may be sitting here listening to this and thinking, "This does not affect me. I just do exegesis of the Scripture, and let it speak to me," but we all, consciously or unconsciously, are affected, even in our reading of Scripture, by the trends about us.

Another clue to reading the future is that when something seems to be reaching an extreme, a reaction of some type can be expected. The problem, of course, is that we do not know how high is up. When has an extreme been reached? Yet, it should be a clue to us. I have observed that theology and a number of other disciplines move in a pendular fashion, back and forth in a series of actions and reactions.

May I suggest a further seemingly paradoxical guideline, one that may seem surprising in light of what I wrote a few paragraphs ago? It is that knowledge of history can help us anticipate the future. A great deal can be learned from the past. One does not have to hold a cyclical view of history or believe that it reduplicates itself exactly to learn from history. What we simply need to learn is that something is not unique merely because it is all we have experienced. Some investors who had only entered the stock market in the 1990s expected that the boom they had experienced would continue uninterrupted. While there may have been bear markets in the past, it would be different this time. This was supposedly a new era, in which traditional measures of value no longer applied, and Warren Buffett and Alan Greenspan were ridiculed as old-fashioned, out of touch, and fearful, probably irreparably warped by the depression experience. Yet reality set in during the years 2000, 2001, and 2002, with the virtual demise of the "crash-dot-coms," many of which lost 90 per cent and more of their value, and the decline of nearly 50% in the Standard and Poors 500 and nearly 80% in the NASDAQ composite. It would not, however, have surprised someone who owned what was touted as a new era stock named Radio Corporation of America from 1929, when its price was at 110, until 1932, when it fell to 5. George Santayana was right when he said, "Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. . . . Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1968) 16.

<sup>35</sup> George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress* (2d ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936) 1.284 (one-vol. rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 82.

There are cycles in history, and there is a reason why, for example, about every 60 years there is a major economic downturn, such as the one we are now in, which is already the longest and deepest bear market in 65 years. The reason, as I have pointed out previously,<sup>36</sup> is that by the end of the cycle, most of the people alive do not remember the last time, and repeat the same mistakes. Read, for instance, John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Short History of Financial Euphoria*.<sup>37</sup> It is also true with war. No one really wins in war, but after a sufficient time, there are leaders who, not having experienced the last one, believe that it will be different for them. If we are wise, we will carefully seek to assure that we do not simply blissfully repeat the errors of our predecessors, either on the right or on the left.

I should acknowledge that I am a contrarian. By that I do not mean what Harold Bloom meant when he said, "I am your true Marxist critic, following Groucho rather than Karl, and I take as my motto Groucho's grand admonition, 'Whatever it is, I'm against it.'"<sup>38</sup> Being a contrarian does not mean simply being negative or perverse. It means being an independent, critical thinker. I am suspicious of anything that seems to be a popular consensus. I am not sure just why (unless it is original sin), but the crowd frequently is wrong, especially at the extremes of trends, so that popular opinion is a contra-indicator. It has been said, for example, that in the United States we customarily standardize on the inferior technology, which is why we are not all watching Betamax recordings rather than VHS, and why the most widely used software is subject to crashes and vulnerable to viruses. Helpful reading here would be a book like *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of the Crowd*.<sup>39</sup> Although first published in 1840, it is remarkably timely today, and still in print.

This may supply us with a principle of guidance in reading trends. Historically based research has shown that when "recession" headlines appear in the popular press, that is an almost infallible sign that the worst has passed and that recovery is about to begin.<sup>40</sup> As one commentator put it, "The public is right in the trends and wrong in the ends." The successful are those who are pessimistic when the crowd is optimistic and optimistic when the crowd is pessimistic. A similar factor may be at work in other areas of culture. When *Time* and other popular news organs ran headlines on the death of God theology in 1966, that was actually a sign of the crest of that movement. I suspect that the wide public awareness of postmodernism is another sign of the onset of its decline.<sup>41</sup>

This means that evangelical scholars should at least be suspicious of highly popular trends, of the culturally and emotionally appealing movements. This

<sup>36</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 134.

<sup>37</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *A Short History of Financial Euphoria* (New York: Whittle, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994) 520.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Mackay, *Extraordinary Public Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (New York: Harmony, 1980).

<sup>40</sup> *Investech Research Market Analyst* 1/4 (March 23, 2001) 4–5.

<sup>41</sup> For indications that postmodernism may have peaked, see my *Truth or Consequences* 319–25.

is not to say that they are necessarily wrong, but that one should not simply assume that the truth can be determined by counting heads. It at least suggests that there is greater danger of erring in the direction of agreement than of difference. Certain problems are perennially with us, but some need greater attention at some times than at others, and at any given time, some are more urgent.

We often do not learn from history because we do not really associate practical developments with theological conceptions. We do not always identify individual theologians with the fortunes of the churches that follow their ideas. A century ago the church was engaged in a struggle between two major types of theology, which could be seen most clearly in the Presbyterian Church, with its strong theological orientation. It would be good, however, to attach the names of the theologians to their ideas and trace the practical implications. What are the fortunes today of those churches that followed the ideas of Charles Hodge, Benjamin B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen, versus those that followed the teachings of Henry Preserved Smith, Charles Briggs, and Harry Emerson Fosdick? The former were persons who advocated what I call a "classical" theology, and the churches that followed that theology are for the most part growing and thriving. The latter theologians tied their theology more closely to the culture of the time, and the churches that followed in that stream are in decline, strangely unappealing to people today.<sup>42</sup> Those who tell us that the task of evangelism is too urgent to waste time on doctrinal issues need to read church history. Interestingly, the writings of the former scholars are still read and utilized, while scarcely anyone even knows the names of Briggs, Smith, and Fosdick, and even fewer read them. The more closely we correlate our theology with the currently popular views, the more quickly they will become irrelevant, especially with the accelerating rate of cultural and intellectual change.

The future matters. Would you rather I gave you one million dollars today, or one cent, with the promise that the cent would be doubled at the end of the day for the next thirty days, while the million dollars would earn only money market interest? At the end of the thirty days, the million dollars would have grown to \$1,000,819, while the cent would have grown to \$10,737,417.

There are long-term cultural cycles, with several shorter cycles within them. On a short term basis (zero to twelve months), I have now shifted from pessimistic to optimistic back to pessimistic again; on an intermediate term basis (one year to ten), I am cautiously optimistic; on a long term basis (10 to 30 years), I am increasingly optimistic. On an ultra-long term basis (eternity) I am of course strongly optimistic. I see a parallel in theological scholarship to what Arthur Schlesinger says about American society in general: "I am a short-term pessimist but a long-term optimist. I think some future crisis will rally the country and bring out new leaders. These are the cycles of history."<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., my *Evangelical Left* 11–14.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, quoted in Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* 375.

Finally, fourth, I hope that we who labor in evangelical theological scholarship will cultivate an interdisciplinary orientation. This will enable us to do two things. On the one hand, it will enable us to know our own limitations, so that we do not attempt to speak authoritatively on topics outside or beyond our competence. I once, for example, declined to write a commentary on Romans, because although I had once been a pretty fair Greek exegete, I did not think I had the in-depth knowledge of NT studies necessary to do that job. On the other hand, it will enable us to do some integration of our disciplines. When the Lilly Foundation underwrote a major study of theological education, the first conclusion, at the end of several years of study, was the problem of integration between the so-called classical and practical disciplines. I strongly encourage us all to read and at professional society meetings to deliberately attend papers outside your field. We expect our students to be able to integrate the several fields to which they are exposed. Those of us who teach should require the same of ourselves.

Looking at the space limitations of this article, I have an existential understanding of the words of John, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear" (John 16:12), but to paraphrase Julie Andrews, also known as Maria von Trapp, "These are a few of my favorite hopes." We who labor today in the field of evangelical theological scholarship have been given a rich birthright by those who have gone before us. We may choose to trade it, like Esau, for a bowl of stew, or we may choose to nurture and enrich and expand it. It is my hope and my prayer that as evangelical scholars we will choose the latter course of action.