2002

The Evangelical Malignation of Barth and the Power of the Vulnerable Word - in "On Being Christian...and Human"

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The Evangelical Malignment of Barth and the Power of the Vulnerable Word

Background: The Evangelical Malaise

Many of Ray Anderson's students are indebted to him for deepening our attachment to the evangelical faith by introducing us to a positive and not a polemical conversation with Karl Barth. And even as our commitments to our various ecclesiastical traditions have deepened over the years, our identification with the adjective "evangelical" remains strong. The Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls casts fresh light on our affection for this gospel word when he describes it as a protest against a nominal Christianity. As such it stands in a long tradition of protest movements against superficial Christian profession, "going back to the fourth century when the desert fathers turned their backs on the attractive commodity then for the first time widely available--Christianity combined with self-indulgence." Formal religion alone was inadequate. The need for inward religion, real as distinct from nominal, was urgent. Wearing his hat as a historian of world missions, Walls assesses the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century as perhaps the most successful of all the reformulations of Christianity in the context of changing Western culture. Though not identical among its exponents, its message included a deep call for radical discipleship, a retaining of the central medieval concern for atonement, and further extended the notion of a life of holy obedience in a secular world.

Crucial to its achievement, Walls insists, was the refusal to abandon the recognized established churches, but instead to combine traditional loyalties with "a serious recognition of individual selfhood and personal decision . . . That reconciliation bridged a cultural chasm in Christian self-identity. It helped to make evangelical religion a critical force in Western culture, a version of Christianity thoroughly authentic and indigenous there." As the missiologists say, evangelicals contextualized the gospel

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2 Ibid., p. 82.
3 Ibid., p. 84.
for the northern Protestant world.4 Walls suggests that the crisis in Western Christianity today is closely connected with the attrition of this historic evangelical achievement, the weakening of the ethical influence of institutional churches, and the increasing efficiency of the state coupled with the relegation of religion to the private sphere of personal judgment and individual decision. Given our present situation, in which "Christianity combined with self-indulgence" has never been more epidemic, and with Christianity increasingly privatized by our social and educational structures, we are now more than ever in need of a robust evangelical recovery of faith in the gospel.

If the need is anything like I've described it, why have evangelicals made so little common cause with the renewal of evangelical theology forged amidst the fierce persecutions of German National Socialism? Why has its primary theological mentor, Karl Barth, too often received a lukewarm response from the American evangelical church, ranging from curt dismissal to cool reprimand? Through his longstanding dialogue with Barth, Bonhoeffer, and of course, his doctoral mentor, Thomas Torrance (himself Barth's student in Basel), Ray Anderson has helped three decades of North American pastors and theologians pay fresh attention to an alternative vision of evangelical theology, to recover and not dismiss Barth's work as both an evangelical protest against and bold engagement with modernity—amidst the assault of German Fascism. For the rest of this essay, I would like to explore both theologically and historically why this resource has received such a limited reception and what strengths Barth may yet contribute to the evangelical witness.

Let us remember that following the victory of the Allies in World War II, Barth never joined the camp followers who identified the triumph of Western democracy with the triumph of the gospel. He chose instead to maintain an even-handed conversation with ideological socialism as well as ideological capitalism and to identify the gospel with neither. Barth's independence from the American hegemony may well be a sufficient answer to our first question. Consider: if a highly nuanced advocate of Western democracy such as Reinhold Niebuhr could be frustrated with Barth's unwillingness to denounce the communists as he once condemned the fascists, small wonder lesser commentators found it so easy to ignore or dismiss this awkwardly neutral Swiss.5

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4 Certainly, as Walls elsewhere remarks, "There is nothing wrong with having local forms of Christianity—provided that we remember that they are local." "The American Dimension of the Missionary Movement," The Missionary Movement in Christian History, p. 235.

5 For Niebuhr, here was a clear case of democracy versus totalitarianism. In contrast, Barth's notion of democracy was influenced by the Swiss tradition of Christian social egalitarian democracy (including Kutter and Ragaz) and hence was more complex than simply the right to vote. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?," in Essays in Applied Christianity (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), p. 187.
A Sampler of Barth Critics

With these questions before us, let us turn to the three representatives of evangelical theology which Ray Anderson has used as case studies in his essay "Evangelical Theology": G.C. Berkouwer, Carl Henry, and Helmut Thielicke. I wish to pay special attention to where each diverges from Barth and consider the resulting implications for a witness to the gospel. In his introduction, Anderson deliberately includes a broad canvas to paint his evangelical family portrait, including Jonathan Edwards' "old school Calvinism," Charles Finney's pragmatic revivalism, the Princetonian orthodoxy of Warfield and Hodge, as well as Darby and Schofield's Dispensationalism. Like Andrew Walls, Anderson identifies a cluster of evangelical concerns, but lingers specifically over three items: orthodoxy in doctrine rooted in the Reformation confession of sola scriptura and sola gratia, biblical authority as an infallible guide to faith and practice, and personal experience of salvation through Jesus Christ. (A most problematic absence from Anderson's short list is Walls' attention to social manifestations of discipleship. This absence of a clear witness to the social justice component of the gospel will be considered later.)

Berkouwer: The Triumph of Doctrine

Anderson describes Berkouwer's theological method as the articulation of correlations between the divine word and the responding human subject. Instead of the liberal tendency to make the human subject the criterion for divine revelation, and unlike Orthodoxy's tendency to make abstract doctrinal constructs the center of faith and thus ignore human experience, Berkouwer describes the very nature of revelation as the Word of God spoken and heard in Holy Scripture. Thus embedded within Scripture lies the true correlation between faith and knowledge, subject and object.

From this frame, Berkouwer finds Barth's theology of the atonement wanting. Barth's error apparently is the Orthodox penchant for constructing abstract doctrine, in this case, of "grace" as a principle of divine triumph. Barth thereby eliminates the human response, since grace by definition always triumphs over sin, but Berkouwer finds this a hollow victory since the dignity of our human response has been disrespected. Further, this commits Barth to an unbiblical universalism in which human response is swallowed up in divine activity, history devalued, and evil is

7 Ibid., p. 482-4.
8 Ibid., p. 486.
no longer taken seriously. "Grace" becomes a theological principle abstracted from Scripture and used to subjugate and thus reduce all else barely to a cipher.9

Barth's reply to these charges may be expressed with a series of questions. What if sinful humanity both in its inflated self-righteousness and deflated despair is overcome by the human obedience of Jesus, the divine intervention of the Son of God? What if the human and divine at-one-ment is first and foremost not a doctrine, nor a principle of correlation, but the very person, Jesus himself? What if the sheer Word, the Word of God in Jesus, in vulnerability and limitation as the person Jesus was and is, what if Jesus is in fact the divine and human presence where correlation or to put it more biblically, where reconciliation occurs? What if Scripture is a written witness to this reality? What if Barth, like his pastoral guide, Blumhardt, is faced here with the issue of obedience to the real presence of Jesus? Is Barth's teaching really about doctrinal dominos in which the grace domino rightly positioned topples all others and sweeps the board?

Berkouwer does not recognize that he mistranslates Barth's refrain (which Barth learned from Blumhardt), "Jesus is Victor." Berkouwer's proposed "Triumph of Grace" is itself an abstraction, a depersonalizing of Jesus the merciful and holy One. It amounts to a stripping away of the sweet exchange between our sin and God's righteousness inherent in Jesus, the personal Word. By turning from the personal Word made flesh, Berkouwer flattens the victory of Jesus into a principle of grace and then labels Barth as a necessitarian universalist. However, for Barth, this reduces Jesus' personal (and personalizing) victory into a theological abstraction, and can only be rejected as utterly contrary to his method.

As I stated earlier, Barth's inspiration for trusting God's victory in and through Jesus is Pastor Blumhardt, who chose to cry out to God for the deliverance of what he could only describe as a demon-possessed member of his parish. Unforgettably Blumhardt dared pray to Jesus to deliver this person. Barth clearly describes the personal nature of this trust.

We can trust a person, and in the case of this person we must do so unconditionally and--with final certainty, as Blumhardt did when he accepted that battle . . . Blumhardt never even dreamed he could control Jesus. He did something which is very different, and which is the only thing possible in relation to this person. He called upon Him . . . He did so with absolute

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confidence. But he still called upon Him. It is thus a matter of confidence in this person, of His free act, of calling upon Him.10

When evangelical theology listens once again to the lesson Barth learned from Blumhardt, it will find itself connecting theology to prayer in an organic way, akin to J. B. Torrance's paraphrase of P. T. Forsyth: "Prayer is to the theologian what original research is to the scientist."11 This is no theology of logical dominos. This is being true to the truth of the Word amongst us. This is calling upon and trusting this Name and none other.

Carl Henry: Guardian of Reason

For Carl Henry, as for his mentor, Gordon Clark, Christian faith must be rationally defensible in terms of the criteria by which all truth is verified. Otherwise, our truth claim reduces to existential and subjective experience. Henry is confident in his belief (his presupposition) that Aristotle's laws of non-contradiction are the test of all truth, including Christian revelation. Though divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included, reason remains the instrument for recognizing it. Authority must be grounded in absolute certainty. The means of knowing certainty must be logically verifiable and rationally accessible to every one. Anderson concludes that Henry's approach leads to "orthodox doctrine rather than a compelling experience of God himself" as the basis of evangelical theology.12

What further shall we say in defence of Barth's scandalous refusal to grant Aristotle a veto on Christian truth claims? Certainly here is no scandal-making for its own sake or to thump an existentialist drum. Barth wonders how can that which is conceived by the Logos be illogical?13 Yet can it be admissible for abstract philosophical principles to have the status of final judge of the truth of Christ? Is Aristotle's logic really the silver thread we must spin to heaven? Is not Jesus our connection to heaven—God's logic (Logos) who descends to us and summons us to the rationality of discipleship? Surely the one (Logos) has priority over the other (logic). Thomas Torrance has demonstrated repeatedly how the case for scientific credibility can best be made when theology pursues its own axioms and methods in conformity to its own field and reality. This is a more rigorous

10 Ibid., p. 176.
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approach to rationality than seeking to defend theology before external criteria.¹⁴

Henry represents an ongoing tendency within various forms of evangelical theology to assume some kind of pre-understanding or philosophical a priori through which the Word of God must be sifted before it can articulate the Word meaningfully (rationally) to culture. However, the epistemological conviction which enables Barth to cast aside this dependency is his belief that the Word, despite all its vulnerability, is inherently articulate and not dependent on ancient or modern paradigms of plausibility to anchor this claim. Barth insists that the proper study of theology is God, the concrete, living Word, and not abstract propositions about God. This disparity between Henry's method--abstract, a priori principles of logic, and the object of his study--Jesus the Christ, the concrete, historical person, the Word made flesh, is stark. From Barth's perspective, Henry has simply deferred to abstract philosophical categories, allowing these to sit in judgement on God's truth made flesh. Despite its evangelical clothing, we have here the liberal tradition in a nutshell: to make human culture and its plausibility structures (ancient or modern) the final criteria which examine and judge the revelation of Christ. The temptation that follows is to tailor our witness to Christ in a manner which gives least offence to whatever the prevailing zeitgeist affirms.¹⁵

With equal clarity Barth saw the political disaster of deferring to non-biblical sources of validation. Perhaps he first learned his lesson when battling the "German Christian" movement. These accommodators sought to show how Christianity did not trespass against but truly fulfilled the Hitlerian renaissance of German culture: "The Swastika is a sign of sacrifice which lets the cross of Christ shine out for us in a new light."¹⁶ It was only those like Barth and Bonhoeffer, deeply convinced that the truth of the gospel involves crucifixion as well as fulfilment, who would insist that the cross of Jesus is in fact the final criterion of truth. The cross is not simply a principle of sacrifice to partner with or translate into other symbols as if this guarantees the gospel's relevance, lest its advocates be found guilty of special pleading before the bar of modern reason. The point made at Barmen was one which Henry never grasped: "We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognise as a source of its


proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures, and truths as God's revelation."\(^{17}\)

Barth would, I believe, concur with Jüngel's assessment of Barmen that there can be "a more natural theology than so-called natural theology: a natural theology which knows Jesus Christ as the one who has reconciled both human beings and the world (2 Cor. 5:19)."\(^{18}\) This is not to deny value to Aristotle's logic nor usefulness in the distinctive features of our culture that have instructed and formed us. Again, says Jüngel, the world has its own lights, it own glories. They are, after all, "refractions of the one light . . . the lights and truths of the theatrum of the gloria dei."\(^{19}\) However, no *a priori* standards and guides, no worldly principles which purport to transmit the meaning of the gospel to modern life, should be granted independent status for interpreting and screening the Word of God.

Let us stay with the political implications a moment longer. Was Carl Henry's conscience at all uneasy following World War II as he recited the addition "under God" in our pledge of allegiance or sat in American churches, gazing at the American flag standing tall at the front of our church sanctuaries? Was he not even a little reminded of Herod's posting of the Roman eagle at the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem? What did (and does) it really mean to declare proudly, "In God we trust," on every penny we earn (or spend)? Is it not a highly ambiguous witness for the evangelical church to be the most visibly successful contextualizer of the gospel to American culture and simultaneously the tax-exempt chaplain to our nation? Who more obviously than the evangelical churches of our leafy suburbs has accommodated to "Christianity combined with self-indulgence"? In our adaptation to modern Western democracy, with our liberal market philosophy, where is the message of the cross, the summons not for self-fulfilment but for death to self, dying to the world and its principles which precede any resurrection? As we take pride in our global leadership have we any space to hear of a different kind of leadership based not on self-aggrandizement but on the cross, where Jesus empties himself of everything but love and carries the strategy of the Sermon on the Mount through to its final climax of sacrifice—even for his enemies? Will this ever fit the plausibility structures which our Western democracies find reasonable? Will not this call to discipleship always shake us to the core and ask us the fundamental questions about our deepest loyalty? An evangelical theology which has listened carefully to the church struggle against National Socialism will not be shy about asking Good Friday questions to the various capitalist nations, including those who pride themselves for being democratic and pluralist.

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\(^{17}\) The Barmen Theological Declaration, quoted in Jüngel, p. xxiii.

\(^{18}\) Jüngel, pp. 26-27.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 29. Quoted from *Church Dogmatics*, IV,3,1, pp. 152-153.
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There are other issues to address, if only briefly, in this context. Barth himself challenged the American church to discover a ringing affirmation of freedom cleansed of its Pelagian self-confidence. This reflects this same fundamental Gospel paradigm shift at work in Barth's method: to redefine our notions of freedom, even as we redefine the meaning of rationality, in the light of the gospel. Freedom from self-contradiction cannot be accepted as an a priori criterion to evaluate the gospel, for unless I am willing to lose my life, I shall not find it again. When Jesus declares that it is in dying that we live, it may seem to be a contradiction, until we encounter the logic of discipleship.

Here I shall be specific. At this late hour (specifically the aftermath of September 11, 2001), shall Western culture learn how to become peacemakers? Unless it does, it cannot discover the liberty of the children of God, nor become aware of the presence of the gospel seed growing secretly among us. In addressing America's "war on terrorism" Former U.S. Senator from Oregon, Mark Hatfield, reminded his audience that the biblical "shalom" is more than the absence of war, but has to do with a sense of well being and fulfilment. Such an "enfleshed" peace is more than spiritual, for it includes diet, health, a place to live, clean water, etc. What threatens peace? All that impedes this lack of fulfilment, including poverty, lack of health care, etc. In the world today, 500,000 children under fifteen are impressed into the military, 900,000 children in the Middle East will never have the opportunity for education. Deny these opportunities and you have the seeds of war. Maldistribution of opportunity leads to war. Hatfield asked, "Will America's current war on terrorism address these issues?" I ask, "Will evangelicals throughout Western society raise such "Kingdom of God" questions or will Hatfield remain an eloquent but isolated voice?"

Helmut Thielicke: No Retreat

Anderson's final evangelical case study considers Helmut Thielicke and his division of modern theology into Cartesian and non-Cartesian camps. For Cartesian theology, the human person functions as the criterion to which the Word of God must be appropriated. So Schleiermacher and Bultmann both use the self-consciousness or the existing self as the criterion for revelation. From our sketch of Carl Henry, we should not be surprised when Thielicke includes in this circle the conservative orthodox theologian for whom the objective truth of revelation is determined by the criterion of human rationality. Anderson surmises that these seeming opposites share

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a hidden Cartesian method, for both seek to "appropriate the Word of God to the primacy of the human subject whether through an intuitive principle, an ethical principle, an existential principle, or a rational principle." Thielicke is confident that the Word of God does address and create a point of contact with humanity. Both here and in the very categories of Cartesian and non-Cartesian, one clearly sees the influence of Barth. However, there are two areas where Thielicke parts company from Barth. First, there is his rather muted affirmation of the virgin birth. Yes, the doctrine serves as a theological warning against any notion of adoptionism, as if Jesus somehow earns his way up the divine ladder through his exemplary God-consciousness. Like all adoptionist christologies, this subverts the gift of God into a human achievement, but Thielicke sees this doctrine as potentially contributing to a commonly docetic habit of distancing Jesus from our common humanity. It has no doubt contributed to the unhealthy use of Mary as our mediator to advocate on our behalf with her son. Barth, however, declines to see this teaching in such a problematic light. He insists instead that the sign of Christmas, like the empty tomb as the sign of the resurrection, should never be separated from the reality of God's redemptive coming among us.

The mention of docetism anticipates Thielicke's most serious concern regarding Barth's theology, including the Barmen Declaration. Writing in his autobiography shortly before his death, Thielicke says that for all Barth's powers of theological formulation, Barth's "attention was fixed on issues whose only relevance was to the inner life of the church." Had Hitler impugned the Heidelberg catechism, then Barth and his followers would have "willingly allowed themselves to be burned at the stake," but the Nazi bosses had no interest in such internal church affairs. Among other exceptions, Thielicke acknowledges Bonhoeffer as one who early on realized that the church needed to offer resistance more broadly. Thielicke also readily acknowledges that from 1937 on, Barth made a "theological volte-face."

What shall we make of Thielicke's complaint against Barth? In retrospect Barth himself was critical of his unwillingness to confront

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25 Ibid.
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National Socialism, particularly its racist brutality towards the Jews. He candidly admits the Church struggle

confined itself to the Church's Confession, to the Church service, and to Church order as such. It was only a partial resistance. And for this it has been properly and improperly reproached: properly—in so far as a strong Christian Church, that is, a Church sure of its own cause in the face of National Socialism, should not have remained on the defensive and should not have fought on its own narrow front alone; improperly—in so far as on this admittedly all too narrow front a serious battle was waged, at least in part and not without some success.26

Elsewhere Barth explicitly confesses his greatest regret concerning Barmen: that he had not made the Jewish question "a decisive feature" of the text. "Of course, in 1934 no text in which I had done that would have been acceptable even to the Confessing Church, given the atmosphere that there was then. But that does not excuse me for not having at least gone through the motions of fighting."27

Thielicke accurately diagnosed in Barth a disinclination to commit the church to addressing the concerns of the world theologically. There was within Barth a reluctance to go beyond the critique-and-clarify task of theology to ensure that the preaching ministry of the church stay true to the content of the Word of God. To his credit, Barth does not excuse but confesses his hesitation. Did Bonhoeffer's own willingness to leap across this reluctance nudge Barth towards a more direct engagement with the social components of evangelical theology? Certainly the political engagement that Bonhoeffer (with fear and trembling) ventured upon has come to be seen as an essential development of the Barmen declaration, urging a more direct encounter with social and political reality.28

Anderson concludes his essay with both an affirmation and a challenge to evangelicals. He affirms evangelical theology for breaking free from the "theological tragedy of fundamentalism without capitulating to the theological fads of postliberal radicalism."29 (Let us give Carl Henry credit for his contribution in this regard.) However, I believe Barth's initial hesitancy fully to engage the world at Barmen has for too long been echoed in evangelical theology as a whole, as if we have never seriously taken stock of Barth and Bonhoeffer's breakthrough. Anderson's measured

words sum up our dilemma: "evangelical theology remains more concerned for the spiritual and intellectual aspects of salvation than for the social and physical needs of people."

By the end of the tragic thirties, Barth definitely did not ignore the "social and physical needs of people." Yet sixty-five years after Barmen, the inclusion of issues surrounding social justice remains highly problematic for evangelicals. On the one hand (as Walls has pointed out), since the days of Wesley and Wilberforce, not to mention the desert fathers, evangelicals have been deeply concerned with issues of social holiness. But on the other hand, Western individualism combined with the private sector mentality has inclined evangelicals to find its niche most comfortably in a modern, suburbanized version of Luther's two kingdoms. Perhaps evangelicals have so domesticated ourselves therein, we find an incapacity or even a disloyalty in raising social issues. Dom Helder Camara, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Recife, used to say, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist." Evangelical theology has commonly failed to ask such questions, as if to ask them is either to be disloyal or to posit discredited Marxist solutions. What keeps us from raising these questions has to do with a certain comfort in restricting theology to one's private life only. Certainly there is a lack of hermeneutical consensus on how one applies a high view of Scripture to the everyday complexities of social and political reality. Indeed, given our real and genuine contemporary disagreements over specific issues of "social justice," we can be more sympathetic as to why no mention of the Jewish question or the Aryan paragraph ever appeared on Barmen's printed page. Nevertheless, in retrospect Barth was correct to insist that there was no excuse for not attempting. Evangelicals may never have a consensus on a proper social witness to the gospel, but if we are simply mute and fail to address major social issues, our witness hovers docetically disincarnate and deservingly lacks credibility.

If evangelicals have been reticent to explore the social and political realities of the gospel, we are not unique. After all, though Barth's decision to address the world directly had its roots in the inadequacy of Barmen's church-centric strategy, it had a much longer gestation than simply the launch of National Socialism. Prior to this he saw the gospel co-opted to defend the militarism of Kaiser Wilhelm, rendered socially irrelevant by Pietism's reduction of the life of faith to a privatized religious experience and even overly systematized by Ragaz's "religious socialism." Only after experiencing multiple false paths, a full four years after Barmen's inadequate response, after the unprecedented military build up of Germany, after his personal deportation from Germany, then and only

30 Ibid., pp. 494-495.
31 Busch, p. 78.
then did he decisively move to interpret matters of social justice within the defining context of justification by faith. In this way he made christology determinative for social as well as personal righteousness. For evangelicals Barth's decision to address social justice issues christologically, remains to be explored in a thoroughgoing way, but Barth has bequeathed us with a framework well worth further consideration. In the meantime, evangelicals have also been left to ponder the prophetic question posed by Lesslie Newbigin: "How often does today's evangelical preaching of Christ as Saviour distort the gospel? A preaching of the gospel that calls men and women to accept Jesus as Saviour but does not make it clear that discipleship means commitment to a vision of society radically different from that which controls our public life today must be condemned as false." Newbigin touched another nerve when he asked whether evangelicals have far too often been seduced into "a mental separation between righteousness as an inward and spiritual state and justice as an outward and political program?"

Power and Poverty

The challenge before evangelical theology is to invigorate the church through the power of the vulnerable Word and not to worry overly much about fitting the good news into dominant paradigms of plausibility. I choose the adjective "vulnerable" to remind us that Christianity began its life on the public stage when Jesus in weakness and risk commandeered the cross as a symbol of power and transfigured it into the victory of God. He met this dominant symbol in the most vulnerable manner possible, accepting the consequences of its cultural authority fully, yet in such a way that did not simply defer to its predetermined meaning. Through the sheer impress of the Word's willing sacrifice, Jesus effected a transfiguration of symbolic meaning. The Roman cross would no longer represent Imperial dominance over the ancient world. The ancient British poem "The Dream of the Rood" evocatively depicts the new situation: "On me the Son of God suffered for a while; therefore now I tower glorious under the heavens, and I may heal every one of those that hold me in awe ... The Son was victorious in that foray, mighty and successful."

Is this not the heart of the evangelical vocation—to proclaim the triumph of the Son of God over all principalities and powers, to declare the Lordship of Jesus to the very foundations of culture through the message

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34 Ibid.
of the vulnerable Word? Shall the church not bear such a risk-taking, vulnerable witness to a culture of power? This way of asking the question reflects the praxis perspective that Blumhardt taught Barth to incorporate into theological epistemology. In other words, one cannot simply sit back and observe culture wind its way down to the crasser expressions of practical atheism, self-indulgence, the punitive neglect of the least among us, and the identification of cultural strength with militarism. Blumhardt asked a question which Barth has since posed to us: "Is it a tolerable theological notion that 2,000 years ago the glory of God was proclaimed over the darkness by signs and wonders, while today patient resignation in the power of darkness is to be the last word?"

Unless the church participates in "Christopraxis," the world cannot know or understand the nature of Christ's self-emptying embrace of the world. Earlier, Ray Anderson challenged evangelical theology to explore questions of praxis.

Again, in practical terms, as well as in the most profoundly theological sense, the form of such an incarnational, evangelical existence in the world can best be expressed as diakonia, a transcendence of service. Thus more important than the form of the church in the world, is the mode of the church's existence in the world . . . diakonia is the gospel, for it is lived transcendence.

As Jesus' culminating diakonia of the cross was enacted before the cultural powers of his own day, so faithful praxis will enact parables and announce today the moving of almighty God in a manner strange to our expected ways of authority and power. Here I wish to mention two forms of Christological praxis on behalf of the poor in our time. For over thirty years Jean Vanier has declared the good news of the vulnerable Word by sharing in weakness and community with the mentally handicapped and their helpers amidst a culture of achievement, status and success. In France and in communities planted throughout the world, Vanier has prayed, played and served with these poorest of the poor, bringing them into the very heart of a common life together in the gospel. Vanier simply reports, "I began l'Arche in 1964, in the desire to live the Gospel and to

follow Jesus Christ more closely. Like all true parables, Vanier's way of pastoral praxis summons us to decision about whether we shall walk past on the other side of the poor or like the good Samaritan, stop and tend their wounds.

An evangelical praxis grounded in the vulnerable Word will lead us to an encounter with less subtle forms of poverty as well. N. T. Wright, the Anglican New Testament scholar, has brought before us the following challenge: just as the church has established baptism and communion as visible reminders of preparing the way of the Lord, so in the light of Jesus' own words, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," let our witness to the gospel include a clear summons, both symbolically and practically, to release the millions of desperately poor children, women and men throughout our world from their international debt. Wright is referring to the huge debts, often contracted under former military regimes purchasing large quantities of Western armaments, who have no legal means of declaring bankruptcy and starting over. This has left countries in Latin America inheriting indebtedness of $640 billion. Sub-Saharan Africa owes more than $216 billion to the world's richest nations and financial institutions. Interest payments alone on these loans makes basic health care and education beyond the remotest possibilities of these nations.

For the nineteenth century American evangelist Charles Finney, the abolition of slavery became a defining expression of repentance and faith in the gospel. Today's systematic and massive financial transfer of resources from these vulnerable millions and their descendents has reached an urgency such that the evangelical church must decide whether or not Finney's call for abolition be translated to the present situation, which is hardly exaggerated when described as a peculiarly post-modern form of slavery. Are the cries of the world's poor a witness to the groaning of the Spirit, reminding our spirit that this world belongs to God? Where are the evangelical declarations on behalf of these enslaved peoples? If we are unsuccessful in changing the policies of Western financial institutions, will our generation be excused for not even "going through the motions of fighting" on their behalf?

Concluding Unnecessary Postscript

As a young seminarian, I eagerly sought out the most meaningful articulation of Christian theology that I could find. Through the encouragement of Ray Anderson and others, some financial aid and sacrifices, I found myself in Aberdeen, Scotland, studying the theological epistemologies of T. F. Torrance and C. S. Lewis, under the wise and caring

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supervision of James Torrance. The debt I owe them all in various ways, especially pastoral ways, is beyond words. However, twenty three years later, I am drawn to recall a Day of Prayer, in which our invited speaker Roland Walls (no stranger to Ray Anderson) glanced up from his lecture notes, gazed straight at James Torrance and with soft-spoken intensity declared, "Theology is not a science. It's an art!" Sitting in the back of the room, I smiled at what had, in the Aberdonian context, a paradoxically iconoclastic effect. I knew almost at once that Walls had shown me how to frame my fledgling dissertation, and ground it with some degree of conceptual legitimacy. I embraced Wall's declaration as permission to explore the many connections and differences between Torrance the theological scientist and Lewis the theological artist, without trying to falsely convert the one into the other or grant either priority. I saw more clearly the theological validity of Lewis's depictive achievement in enabling us to taste and see the truth of the gospel through his literary art—and that this could indeed stand alongside the interpretive achievement of Torrance's theological science.

Yet over the intervening years I have come to see how essential it is to weave one more thread into theology's tapestry. Walls was quite right to insist that theology is an art, though perhaps it was a bit of bravado to simply dismiss the scientific thread. Theology is more than an art, more than art and science. Theology is worship. And as the ancient prophets reminded Israel, true worship entails authentic service (praxis). As theological aesthetics rescues theological science from arid intellectualism, theology as praxis keeps both aspects honestly grounded in a discipleship of the cross.

Reflecting on his native Belfast and contrasting it with his adopted Oxford, C. S. Lewis once mused that moralistic Puritanism is the memory Christianity takes in an industrial, commercial society even as theological aestheticism is the memory it takes just before it dies in a cultured, fashionable climate. Hence the recent and exemplary initiatives of theology through the arts in America and in Britain must be both welcomed and warned. The story told about Thomas Aquinas' visit to the Vatican is worth recalling here. The Pope, much enjoying the opportunity to escort his great theologian through the Vatican's splendor, could not help but boast to Aquinas, "No longer can Peter say, "silver and gold have I none!" Aquinas replied, "Nor can Peter now say to the lame man, "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk." A theological aesthetics must again and again humble itself before the sacrificial service of the Son of God, and kneel at that place where beauty was crowned with thorns.

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and crucified. George Macleod, the founder of the Iona Community, pled with the church of his day not to indulge in any romantic betrayal of the gospel:

I simply argue that the Cross be raised again at the centre of the market-place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage dump . . . Because that is where he died. And that is what He died about.42

Having come too slowly to this position many years later, I now see what I had glossed over before, and that is Ray Anderson's consistent witness to a praxis of what he calls "lived transcendence" as the fruit and fulfilment through the Spirit of the mission of the Son of God.43 "More important than the form of the church in the world is the mode of the church's existence in the world . . . diakonia is the gospel, for it is lived transcendence."44 With all its academic and ecclesiastical complexities, its increasing intellectual sophistication and aesthetic sensitivity—and despite its lack of consensus on socio-political commitments—this prayerful task remains for the evangelical community: to enfold the way of service to the poor into the heart of our theological witness to the gospel.

43 Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God, p. 275.
44Ibid.