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The Life and Legacy of Carl F. H. Henry: A Remembrance

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Carl Henry, who died in his sleep December 7, devoted his long and illustrious career as a theologian to building and defending the “intellectual struts” of evangelical theology. His death at age 90 closes an important chapter in the history of American evangelicalism—and raises anew the great questions with which he struggled. Among those questions was one he revisited time and time again: Will evangelicalism remain recognizably evangelical?

Henry came to faith in Christ as a young man with a promising career in journalism. Before age 23, he had already edited a major Long Island newspaper and was covering a large part of the region for The New York Times. A call to ministry turned him to Wheaton College at the very moment conservative Protestantism was about to emerge with renewed vigor on the national scene. At Wheaton, Henry met and developed a close friendship with a young evangelist named Billy Graham. Their lives and careers would intersect at numerous points over the next half-century and more.

Wheaton also introduced Henry to Helga Bender. They married in 1940 and were later to have two children. Henry stayed in the Chicago area to complete three degrees in theology after Wheaton and later earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University. From the start, Carl Henry was a theologian to the marrow of his bones. Before long, he would emerge as the most formative theological mind of his generation—and as the intellectual father to the movement soon to be known as evangelicalism.

Henry and his colleagues in the young evangelical movement wanted to establish the intellectual and moral credibility of orthodox Christianity in the modern world. They had taken the measure of the modern secular worldview and knew both its seductions and its ultimate despair. At the same time, they saw fundamentalism as a failed project doomed to ultimate irrelevance by its fixation on non-essential doctrines and its lack of social conscience. Henry’s first major book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, was a lament of fundamentalism’s failure and a proposal for evangelical recovery.

For the next half-century, Henry stood at the center of virtually every major development in evangelical life, combining tenacity with restlessness. When evangelicals established Fuller Theological Seminary as a beachhead for orthodox theology on the west coast, Henry was on the founding faculty. When, prompted by Billy Graham, evangelicals established *Christianity Today* as their flagship magazine, Carl Henry was the logical choice as editor. In addition, he would serve as chairman of the historic Berlin Congress on Evangelism in 1966 and would eventually teach at a host of evangelical institutions, produce a massive body of published writings, and influence successive generations of young evangelical thinkers and leaders.

At the same time, Henry did not sail placidly through his long and remarkable career. He left the editorship of *Christianity Today* after conflict over the magazine’s direction. He would later register his great disappointment in the trajectory of institutions he had loved and served—most notably Fuller Theological Seminary—and would seem to vacillate

between hope and despair when he considered the future of the evangelical movement he had helped to establish. He worried that evangelicalism had become “a lion on the loose that no one today seriously fears.”

Though later associated with World Vision and Prison Fellowship, he devoted most of his career after Christianity Today to a massive theological project published as the six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority*. Beyond this, he became the evangelical elder statesman, and an encourager to younger theologians who would take up his task.

His years at the helm of Christianity Today (1956-1967) were a high-water mark for the evangelical movement. Under Henry’s editorship, Christianity Today would engage the great issues of the day, presenting an evangelical alternative to the liberal Christian Century. Henry assembled a corps of young evangelical journalists and world-class scholars to write for the magazine, and used his editorial column to engage the cutting-edge issues of the day. He departed the editor’s chair at age 54, declaring his intention to devote the next several years of his to writing and research on the doctrine of God.

In *God, Revelation and Authority*, Henry presented a magisterial defense of Christian truth against the challenges of liberal theology, modern secularism, and contemporary philosophy. He opened the project with a cogent word of warning about the challenge faced by evangelicals in the modern world: “No fact of contemporary Western life is more evident than its growing distrust of final truth and its implacable questioning of any sure word.”

In answer to that challenge, Henry projected, articulated, and defended the reality of divine revelation. As he explained: “Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency of a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.”

The Bible, he insisted, is “the reservoir and conduit of divine truth, the authoritative written record and exposition of God’s nature and will.” Henry was a stalwart defender of biblical inerrancy and propositional truth even as many evangelicals and their institutions moved away from these bedrock convictions. When biblical inerrancy was denied by some evangelicals and dismissed as unimportant by others, Henry argued that inerrancy is “not a dispensable doctrine, and the church has nothing to gain by evading the issue.”

When others denied that God’s revelation in the Bible is irreducibly propositional in form, Henry countered that their arguments would lead to irrationality. Revelation, he insisted, is “rational communication” presented to us in “conceptual-verbal form.” God has revealed Himself in intelligible concepts meant to be understood through human language. Though most moderns (and postmodernists) join the revolt against all external authority, Henry defended the Bible as God’s Word in written form, and allowed for no compromise on the affirmation of biblical authority.

Ultimately, God has revealed Himself to his human creatures so that we might know Him, Henry asserted. To reject this revelation is to abandon any hope of knowing our Creator. Thus, the evangelical abdication of biblical authority was, to Henry, an abdication of evangelical integrity.

In a very real sense, Henry’s great project was published after some evangelical horses had already escaped the barn. One younger scholar dismissed *God, Revelation and Authority* as several thousand pages of “turgid scholasticism.” Others rejected Henry’s theological method as “overly rationalistic” and altogether too committed to propositional revelation. Henry’s response was to press his case. Just what would we gain by embracing irrationality? Without propositional revelation, how do we look to the Bible with any confidence that we can know anything?

Carl Henry remained a theologian to the end. He continued to write and lecture well into his 80s, and his greatest legacy may well be found among some of the youngest evangelicals of our times, who have tasted the fruit of the postmodernist tree, drunk from the wells of modern skepticism, and listened to the revisionist calls of the evangelical left—and are looking for the intelligent defense of biblical truth Henry presented in *God, Revelation and Authority*. The entire work was brought back into print by Crossway Books in 1999, and is now available to the rising generation of evangelical students.

Always watching the signs of the times, Henry saw Western culture sliding into a decadent, immoral age—the inevitable result of its rejection of biblical truth. He called for evangelicals to confront and engage the great moral and intellectual issues of the day, and to avoid both fundamentalist retreat and liberal surrender. The problem, he advised, is

not that we lack resources for this challenge, but that we lack resolve.

“Our weak batteries can be recharged by a jump cable that reconnects believers to the divine current held in store for us by our supernatural Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer. We rely too much on our own finite power and world energy; we are dazzled by technology more than by theology and morality. To gain God’s empowerment for mission we must first acknowledge our vulnerabilities and our spiritual immaturity. Beyond our lifetime, if Christ tarries, others will run the relay and carry the torch. For us, in the rocky terrain of the present-day cultural conflict, the time is now, and the race is now.”

The race is now over for Carl F. H. Henry, and he ran his race faithfully. The torch has now been passed to a new generation. The real question is now this: Will the present generation of evangelicals run the race—or run from the challenge?

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