

SEMINARY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THE CENTRALITY OF SCRIPTURE: REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT CRISIS IN EVANGELICAL SEMINARY EDUCATION

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As the most recent issue of *Theological Education* makes clear, theological education in America is in turmoil.¹ The journal reports the findings of the first major study of the Doctor of Ministry degree program in American seminaries. But the lack of consensus about the nature, purpose and evaluation of the degree that it reveals merely signals the severity of the underlying identity crisis that plagues seminaries today as a whole, since the D. Min. is widely agreed to be a continuation and extension of the seminary's basic degrees and curriculum. As Faith E. Burgess put it: "We do not have any clear understanding as to what is 'competence' and thus we are not clear what we mean by the D. Min. degree denoting 'advanced competence'."²

Since seminaries today often do not know where they are going or where they think their students ought to go, it becomes virtually impossible for them to determine when someone has taken a significant step toward getting there. No one is quite sure, therefore, what the D. Min. really signifies, not to mention the M. Div., M. A. and M. R. E. Just what is it that seminary students ought to learn and be able to do, and how will we know if they have achieved it? Nobody seems to know for sure.

Walter Brueggemann's contribution is certainly a step in the right direction toward solving this serious problem.³ His goal of stating "a case for theological education on biblical/theological grounds"⁴ is noble and needed. And his concern is well founded. The Church and its seminaries today seem to lack the courage to confront their culture prophetically with "an alternative reading of reality" derived from the Bible.⁵

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¹Cf. "The Doctor of Ministry Program in the Context of Theological Education," *Theological Education* 23/2 (1987).

²F. E. Burgess, "Response to D. Min. Report," *Theological Education* 23 (1987) 77.

³W. Brueggemann, "The Case for an Alternative Reading," *Theological Education* 23 (1987) 89-107.

⁴Ibid., p. 89.

⁵Brueggemann's analysis is based on the metaphor of a "script," which he borrows from transactional analysis. His point is that our society and the Scriptures provide us with conflicting ways of reading reality that play themselves out in corresponding patterns of behavior. The task of theological education is to enable students to understand the Biblical "script" in order that they might confront

Moreover, Brueggemann's warning is also timely. Given the power of civil religion and the pervasive dominance of our culture's false "reading of reality," our new "script" as Christians must not "be generated out of our raw experiences or our good intention."⁶ In society at large we are in a "crisis situation" in which "the reading of reality entrusted to us in the community of faith is in profound contradiction with the dominant reading of reality" found around us.⁷ Left to ourselves, we cannot but be overwhelmed by it.

So Brueggemann warns us: "Unless the Bible receives a fresh, serious, honest hearing among us, the dominant script of brutality, selfishness and inhumaneness shall surely have its way."⁸ Thus his own analysis brings him to the conclusion that "the task for theological education . . . is to keep the crucial, reflective conversation going between the script that we hold to be authoritative and the context of American society in which other scripts are powerfully at work."⁹

I. THE PROBLEM BEFORE US

As an evangelical I welcome Brueggemann's call back to the basics and his insistence that the Bible must remain "the center of the theological enterprise."¹⁰ I sincerely hope his summons will be heard. But I fear that the problem is even more serious than he has indicated, as illustrated by the situation in evangelical seminaries today.

This reaction might appear surprising. After all, evangelicals have prided themselves on having the Bible at the center of their faith and practice. And our seminaries have reflected this conviction. Most evangelical seminaries do not yet have to fight the fundamental identity crisis that other Protestant seminaries are confronting.

But our formal allegiance to the authority of the Scriptures has lulled us to sleep. The same plague is attacking our house that is threatening nonevangelical seminaries today. It may look different in our context, but it is just as deadly among us as it is among those who have already surrendered to its advances.

the scripts society is propounding—i.e., positivism, reductionism, relativism and determinism. See *ibid.*, pp. 90 ff., for his development of these points and their sources.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 93. Although I do not share some of his sociological reading of certain Biblical passages and might differ on various critical issues regarding Scripture, Brueggemann is certainly right at this point. As Brueggemann puts it, "the key task now entrusted to theological education in this critical season of faith is to see the Bible in its aniconic power, as a text that breaks images, critiques religion, exposes ideology, identifies hidden interest—in order to make room for the holiness of God and newness of humanity."

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 102.

For at the heart of Brueggemann's proposal is the assumption that once the Bible is restored to its rightful place, seminaries today will be prepared to be as self-critically reflective concerning the Bible and its message as we are of our culture and its concerns. In short, Brueggemann seems to assume (1) that we will be ready and willing to do the hard work of exegesis once we are correctly poised to go back to the Bible and (2) that the seminary community will be able to agree on the methodology and goals of exegesis itself. But the experience of evangelical seminaries calls both of these assumptions into question.

Anyone who has been involved in Biblical studies of late knows how problematic the latter assumption is.¹¹ For example, although I agree with Brueggemann's goals I disagree with some of the exegetical assumptions and conclusions he advocates in order to support them. We both agree that the Bible should be at the center of our enterprise, but we do not agree in part on what we should do with it once we get it there. And this kind of disagreement is just as true among evangelicals as it is between evangelicals and those who sit elsewhere on the spectrum of theological perspective. Even a conservative statement of faith and the relatively homogeneous faculty it secures theologically do not automatically produce a uniform methodology.¹²

This is not the time or place for the kind of detailed hermeneutical discussion needed to deal adequately with the crucial methodological issues presently surrounding the discipline of Biblical studies and their implications for our seminaries. Such a discussion must be left for the seminaries to work out for themselves in the contexts of their own theological, philosophical and hermeneutical commitments.

I would like to focus my attention on an even more elementary roadblock that almost all seminaries face today: the problem of willingness. By willingness I mean the acceptance of the value of a task that results in a readiness to take up that task. In short, it is the energetic and responsible inclination to do what one believes ought to be done. It is thus both a volitional response and a

¹¹See for example R. H. Fuller, "What is Happening in New Testament Studies?", *SJT* 23 (1980) 90-100, who surveys the contemporary situation in NT studies and concludes that "the historical-critical approach to the Bible is bankrupt" because of the uncertainty and seeming irrelevance of its conclusions (p. 96). L. H. Silberman, "Listening to the Text," *JBL* 102 (1983) 3-26, speaks of the "stasis" that characterizes Biblical studies today—i.e., "the state of equilibrium or inactivity caused by opposing equal forces" (p. 3). Biblical scholarship today stands divided over how the Bible should be interpreted and is resolving the issue by simply offering more and more competing approaches to the text.

¹²The most recent illustration of this is the decision on the part of the majority of the voting membership attending an annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society to refuse further membership to R. H. Gundry because of his conclusions reached in *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). Gundry continued to affirm the Society's statement of faith concerning the inerrancy of the Bible but differed from the majority on what kind of methodology and literary-critical conclusions can be contained within such a conviction. The importance of the rising methodological pluralism among evangelicals can be seen in the fact that this question was addressed at a more popular level in "Redaction Criticism: Is It Worth the Risk?", *Christianity Today* (October 18, 1985) 1-12. For an overview of and response to the issue from within the evangelical ranks see now G. R. Osborne, "Round Four: The Redaction Debate Continues," *JETS* 28 (1985) 399-410.

moral disposition in which what we believe should be done determines what we are ready to do.

In the case of those seminaries that are already committed to the centrality of the Bible in theological education, the task in view is the exegetical one. For others it is the task of restructuring the curriculum so that the Bible is once again the focus of attention. In both cases, however, I fear that many of our students are no longer willing to respond to such a challenge. And in both cases I believe that the reasons are essentially the same, although they manifest themselves in different ways.

II. THE ROOTS AND RESULTS OF UNWILLINGNESS: LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Let us consider the current situation in evangelical seminaries in the hope that our experience can shed some light on the problem of willingness that these seminaries share with most other seminaries across the theological spectrum. Although evangelical schools are already one step ahead of those institutions Brueggemann seemingly has in mind, the problem that haunts evangelical institutions is the same pervasive lack of willingness that resists either rediscovering or, in our case, taking up the exegetical task.

Evangelicals have the Bible where it ought to be theoretically, but in our praxis we are not willing to make it the heart of our education. In other words, while others may not preach the centrality of the Scriptures we do not seem willing to practice what we wish others would join us in preaching.

The reasons for this unwillingness to study the Bible are cultural and theological. Although the interrelationship between these two factors is very complex and ultimately cannot be disentangled, for the sake of discussion I will treat them separately.

Culturally, evangelical seminaries are suffering the first fallout of the "whirl of change" affecting American evangelicalism that James Davison Hunter has so clearly documented.¹³ His study is valuable for evangelicals because rather than being a discussion about us it is an analysis of us. Hunter surveyed and interviewed students and teachers at nine of the most commonly acknowledged leading evangelical colleges and seven of the "most important" evangelical seminaries. He lived and taught at such schools. His goal was to provide a sociological interpretation of evangelicalism's future leaders and the forces influencing them (p. 13). The generating question behind Hunter's study was a simple one: What are the "cultural costs and consequences" of evangelicalism's "survival in the modern world?" (a survival that, he points out, has surprised most students of culture and social subcultures; pp. ix, 203).

Hunter's results are not unexpected for those who have been involved in these institutions and know where the next generation is headed. Never-

¹³J. D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987). See also his earlier *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1983). Further quotations and references taken from *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* will be noted directly in the text.

theless there is something about seeing our perceptions and values in black and white and in all their statistical glory that makes one sit up and take notice.

1. *Evangelical leaders of the coming generation are participating more than ever in all aspects of the prevailing culture of "modernity."* As a consequence they are suffering to one degree or another its various challenges and crises. In particular, "modernity creates conditions which complicate the ability of people to sustain a stable and coherent existence in the world. Modern man suffers from a crisis of belief" (p. 8). It is this basic fact that is particularly difficult for evangelicals, since Protestantism's task and identity has been defined by what it believes, not by its external institutional authority as in Catholicism, its experience as in Hinduism and Buddhism, or its religious, ethnic community as in Judaism. So naturally evangelicals, as the most conservative Protestants, would suffer severely from the instability, relativism and fragmentation of modern culture since they have what Hunter calls a "fixation with theology" (p. 19).

This is what makes the evangelical experience today so instructive for others. As Brueggemann points out, most seminaries have already been coopted by their culture. Liberalism is a self-conscious adaptation of modern values and cultural norms.¹⁴ Evangelicals have tried to resist such intrusions. Thus, as Hunter's study reveals, they are still much further behind the modern world than liberal theological communities in almost every way.

Yet Hunter's study also makes clear that evangelicalism today is in the process of change as the weight of modernity bears down upon it. Those who are already much farther down the road than we are can thus look back to see why they are where they are and how one gets there. But it is just as instructive to look ahead as it is to glance over one's shoulder.¹⁵

2. *Evangelicals have responded to this fundamental challenge to their identity by trying to bend without breaking.* "Indeed," Hunter observes, "the

¹⁴See D. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 25: "With the emergence of liberal and modernist Christian theologies, we find the explicit commitment of the Christian theologian to the basic cognitive claims and ethical values of the modern secular period." This is of course not necessarily a bad thing. The basic principle of liberalism—namely, the "critical investigation of all claims to meaning and truth, religious or otherwise" (p. 26)—is in fact crucial. But evangelicals have rightly, I believe, rejected classical liberalism's task as expressed in Tracy's words as "the need to rethink the fundamental vision and values of traditional Christianity in *harmony* with the fundamental vision and values of modernity" (p. 26; italics mine). Hence as Tracy himself concludes: "How that formal ideal might be maintained without a continuance of the inadequacies of the specific material conclusions of the liberals and modernists remains . . . the major task of the contemporary post-liberal period in theology" (p. 27).

¹⁵One effect of the modernization of evangelicalism is its new ability to break out of its former social, theological and philosophical ghetto into dialogue with those who have made this immigration before them. For this idea and its implications for the teaching of philosophy in seminary see now R. J. Mouw, "Evangelicalism and Philosophy," *TToday* 44 (1987) 329-337. In his words: "The more recent dissolution of the strong sense of cultural alienation among evangelicals and their fellow travellers in other conservative Protestant communities . . . has resulted in a mood much like the *aggiornamento* spirit of post-Vatican II Catholicism in the United States" (p. 329).

history of conservative Protestantism in twentieth-century America has, in large measure, been the history of the effort to maintain the purity and integrity of its theology" (p. 19). But it is an integrity under attack. So evangelicals have had to "search for boundaries of acceptability" while at the same time being open to new developments in epistemology, philosophy, and theological and exegetical methodology. The key areas in our search for "boundaries" have been inerrancy, hermeneutics, our understanding of Christianity's exclusivistic soteriology, and the integration of the so-called "social gospel" with evangelism (pp. 20 ff., 31 ff., 34 ff., 40 ff).

And we have bent considerably. Indeed, Hunter concludes that at the end of the twentieth century

there is less sharpness, less boldness, and, accordingly, a measure of opaqueness in [evangelicals'] theological vision that did not exist in previous generations (at least to their present extent). A dynamic would appear to be operating that strikes at the very heart of the Evangelical self-identity.

In short, our "theological tradition is conforming in its own unique way to the cognitive and normative assumptions of modern culture" (p. 46).¹⁶

Again, this makes evangelicalism today a valuable mirror for those outside it. As we struggle with our own "boundaries," others will be able to perceive how their own traditions have already solved these problems of identity regarding Scripture, pluralism, hermeneutics, and the role of social involvement. They will also be able to see more clearly the new problems that have resulted because of their old solutions, problems that evangelicals can now only imagine. Specifically it will become clear why the Bible is no longer at the heart of their education. For their part, evangelicals will be able to see the eventual effects of their own growing unwillingness to study Scripture by perceiving more clearly what their traditional boundaries keep in as well as what they keep out.

3. *Evangelicalism has become its own worst enemy.* This is not because we have changed. Cultural change is unavoidable and by no means necessarily bad. There is no hidden romanticism here. There is much that evangelicals can learn from those who are more "modern" than they are. Rather, evangelicals are their own worst enemies because they have changed in a particular way. In Hunter's words, we have joined those who have gone the way of modernity before us by replacing the "de-objectivization" so common in modern culture with its flip side, "subjectivization" (p. 47).

Hunter's analysis of this dominant movement in modern society and its effects on education are not new. Many people in the last three decades, from many different perspectives, have warned us about the disastrous effects of epistemological relativism on culture in general and on education in par-

¹⁶This same observation and prognosis was made by M. E. Marty, "Tensions Within Contemporary Evangelicalism: A Critical Appraisal," in *The Evangelicals: What They Believe, Who They Are, Where They Are Changing* (ed. D. F. Wells and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 190-208. "Evangelicals' increasing cultural openness leads them to an embrace, albeit a critical one, of intellectual and artistic currents that subtly alter the character of faith's expression" (p. 197).

ticular. There is no need to rehearse them here.¹⁷ But as Allan Bloom has pointed out in his recent contribution to a long line of critiques of modern culture, "there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."¹⁸ So if truth is relative, why pursue it—especially if this means having to learn foreign languages to do so—and then claim to have found it, proclaim it to others, argue about it, and even at times exclude others because of it? The whole enterprise seems barbaric.

From the outside looking in, evangelical seminaries still appear to be barbaric in this sense. After all, most still hold to inerrancy, the exclusive claims of the Christian gospel, and the mandate of evangelism. But Hunter has shown us that in reality evangelical leaders of the next generation have already accepted to a great degree the subjectivist approach to the truth of the Bible.

The evidence for this is the way in which evangelicals have rejected what they understand to be neo-orthodoxy on the one hand while at the same time accepting one of its most basic presuppositions. As Hunter observes, although neo-orthodoxy as a movement has "played itself out," nevertheless "there are indications that as a mode of theological discourse, it may be gaining intellectual credibility and popular support—yet not from the ranks of disaffected liberals but, rather, from *within* Evangelical quarters" (p. 27).

What Hunter means by neo-orthodoxy's "theological discourse" is what is portrayed as its subjectivist rather than objectivist approach to Biblical interpretation—that is, the idea that the Bible only becomes the Word of God when it is read and accepted in faith by the believer (pp. 26–27). The point here is not the accuracy of Hunter's understanding of neo-orthodoxy's doctrine of Scripture but rather his observation that evangelicals have accepted this idea of the subjective nature of Scripture's authority often associated with neo-orthodoxy. Evangelicals may say formally that this neo-orthodox position is wrong, but in practice their positions on specific points of doctrine illustrate that they are in reality subjectivists in their approach to the Bible (pp. 27 ff.).¹⁹ In other words, what many future evangelical leaders believe demonstrates that "the meaning of a text or story [from the Bible] would necessarily vary

¹⁷See for example G. K. Chesterton, "The Suicide of Thought," in *Orthodoxy* (New York: Image, 1959) 30–45; C. Derrick, *Escape from Scepticism: Liberal Education as if Truth Mattered* (La Salle: Sherwood Sugden, 1977).

¹⁸A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) 25.

¹⁹This same dissonance within evangelicalism between what evangelicals affirm or deny formally and what their doctrines, attitudes and actions reveal about their operative convictions has been pointed out in Marty, "Tensions" 198 ff. He gives four grounds from the doctrines and behavior of evangelicals for his thesis that "evangelicals often show more similarities with and affinities to mainstream Protestants, with whom they disagree more openly on the cognitive level but with whom they have more profound similarities so far as world views are concerned," than they do with fundamentalists to whom they purport to show "respect" and with whom they share "assent to the old nineteenth-century Protestant symbols."

for each believer since everyone would be approaching the Bible from a different life situation. One then cannot speak of ultimate truth per se, only ultimate truth for each believer" (pp. 26-27).

As the history of liberalism bears out, and as those looking back at evangelicalism from a modernity come of age can testify, this move is a radically significant one. It alters the foundations. It propels a movement in a new direction. As Hunter points out, the "de-objectivization" of one's authority is an emphasis that "shifts from a concern with the proclamation of an objective and universal truth to a concern with the subjective applicability of truth. In different terms, there is a shift from a concern with 'what the Bible states' to 'what God is telling us'" (p. 47). That last phrase sounds very familiar to evangelicals today.

It is easy to see why this shift takes place. The questions the modern world poses for those still committed to the authority and inerrancy of the Bible are formidable ones. And the confusion and proliferation of answers that evangelicals are giving, all from the same Bible, are disconcerting to students (to say the least). So the quickest and safest way out of this uncertainty and confusion is to resort to religious experience. Again, this is nothing new. The history of liberalism documents it, and evangelicals are reliving it in their own experience. Thus sociologists like Hunter can study it and even generalize this move into a principle. As he puts it (p. 47):

When traditional affirmations of religious reality are, to whatever degree, undermined by modern forms of rationalism, they are simultaneously de-objectified. What was "known" with a taken-for-granted certitude becomes, at best, a "belief." Further along in this process, it becomes a "religious opinion" or a "feeling."

Once this process is set in motion it almost always escalates, until what was once known as "orthodox" and "traditional" collapses (pp. 47 ff.).

III. THE CULTURAL GROUND OF UNWILLINGNESS

We are now in a position to see why it will be almost impossible for the liberal establishment to heed Brueggemann's call and why evangelicals, who still have the Bible at the heart of their seminary education, often seem so unwilling to study it. The cultural answer is clear. On the one hand, the hard work of exegesis no longer seems to pay off emotionally or spiritually. The Bible, viewed as distinct from the believer, is now suspect. To distance oneself from the text in order to discover what the text may be saying to the reader, the necessary first step in exegesis, only seems to bring uncertainty and an intellectual deadness.

Even those who are committed to the historical-critical or historical-grammatical methods have sensed the crisis caused by the panorama of conflicting opinions that now surround almost every text seriously investigated.²⁰ The historical approach to the Bible has not led quickly to a

²⁰For a recognition and assessment of the impact of this lack of consensus among Biblical scholars and its methodological roots see P. Stuhlmacher, *Schriftauslegung auf dem Wege zur biblischen*

growing exegetical consensus. And commentaries do not make good devotional reading for most. Disarray in the field of Biblical studies, and the lack of spiritual passion among many of its practitioners, have certainly combined to make such an approach appear unattractive and perhaps even misguided. Thus because what one "feels" about the Bible and God is now culturally supported it can easily be wedded with one's subjective experience as the primary source of certitude for liberals and the growing source of certitude for evangelicals. The result of such a marriage is that the Bible itself becomes marginalized. Why work hard at learning Greek and Hebrew, history and ancient culture, the history of the interpretation of the text, and so on, if the payoff for all this work is negligible? All the more so if your professors can argue epistemologically and hermeneutically against such work! Feelings are quicker and easier to come by.

Perhaps this explains why only thirty-seven percent of seminarians Hunter surveyed agreed that "being productive in life and making a constant effort in a chosen field are among the most important qualities of life," while eighty-two percent of seminarians agreed that "self-improvement is important to me and I work hard at it" (pp. 54, 66). One could draw many conclusions from such an observation, but it becomes obvious that the hard task of exegesis certainly falls in the category of the traditional pastor's or teacher's "constant effort in a chosen field" while "feelings" fall naturally into the lap of "self-improvement." What most seminary teachers and curricula still promote as the work of the pastor is seen by most to be something no longer worth working hard at.

Such an emphasis on the subjective approach to the text thus corresponds to the cult of the self that has gripped American society at the end of the twentieth century. Hunter is simply a recent figure in a long line of observers who emphasize the emergence of this dominant cultural current.²¹ In his words:

Both popular and more serious academic scholarship have documented a dramatic turnabout within the larger American culture on the count from the mid-1960's. It was a turnabout entailing an accentuation of subjectivity and the virtual veneration of the self, exhibited in deliberate efforts to achieve self-understanding, self-improvement, and self-fulfillment.

Because evangelicalism has participated so strongly in this cultural movement, Hunter can thus speak of "a total reversal" having taken place in "the evangelical conception of the nature and value of the self" (p. 65). "In a word, the Protestant legacy of austerity and ascetic self-denial is virtually obsolete in the larger Evangelical culture and is merely extinct for a large percentage of the coming generation of evangelicals" (p. 73).

On the one hand, such a destruction of the misguided ethic of self-denial for the sake of self-denial and the theology of "sacrifice for the Lord" that so

Theologie (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975); *Vom Verstehen des Neuen Testaments: Eine Hermeneutik* (2d ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986).

²¹Besides the works referred to above (nn. 17, 18) see now R. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper, 1985).

dominated popular Protestant culture is very helpful. The gospel certainly does appeal to mankind's deepest desires for happiness and self-fulfillment.²² But the troubling reality is that sociologists such as Hunter can now document that for the next generation of evangelical leaders "self-fulfillment is no longer a natural by-product of a life committed to higher ideals but rather is a goal, pursued rationally and with calculation as an end in itself" (p. 74).

When this relatively new cult of the self is combined with the long history of anti-intellectualism that has characterized evangelical culture to begin with,²³ the forces standing against a willingness to study Scripture historically and intellectually and the forces supporting a subjective approach to the text are equally strong and apparently overwhelming. As Richard Hofstadter pointed out almost twenty-five years ago:

To the extent that it becomes accepted in any culture that religion is largely an affair of the heart or of the intuitive qualities of mind, and that the rational mind is irrelevant or worse, so far will it be believed that the rational faculties are barren or perhaps dangerous.²⁴

Such a belief is rampant in our seminaries today. But we should not be surprised. This is the teaching of our recent heritage as evangelicals, and it is the conviction of our culture. What is surprising is the ease with which such winds are blowing evangelical seminary education in a new direction and the way in which they have been warmly welcomed by evangelical students and faculties.

IV. THE THEOLOGICAL GROUNDS OF UNWILLINGNESS

Again, this is not the place to enter into detailed theological discussion. But it is important to point out that the other reason evangelical seminaries are following in the footsteps of their liberal counterparts is theological. Hunter is right: Evangelicals do have a "fixation with theology" (p. 19). So evangelicals must be able to offer a theological rationale for their new unwillingness to study the Bible. And they do.

Specifically, evangelicals today argue for their new posture of resistance to the serious, original-language-based study of the Scriptures on three grounds: theology proper, pneumatology, and the doctrine of revelation. My suspicion is that these theological rationales are more a reflection of the dominant American culture than a distinctive, driving force behind the evangelical subculture. Nevertheless evangelicals now have an emerging theology to

²²See J. Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986), for a clear presentation of the proper role of the desire for self-fulfillment and the call to self-denial in theology and ethics.

²³See R. Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962) 55-116, for a discussion of the role evangelicalism has played in promoting anti-intellectualism in American culture. He concludes that "the evangelical movement has been the most powerful carrier of this kind of religious anti-intellectualism, and of its antinomian impulse" (p. 47).

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 47.

support their unwillingness, a theology that is strikingly similar to some of the central tenets of classical liberalism.

From the standpoint of theology proper, evangelicals argue that our personal relationship with Christ lessens the necessity of looking at Scripture historically. Evangelicals stress the born-again experience and the intimate relationship with God that results to such a degree that our access to God and our knowledge of God collapse together. "I know that Christ lives in my heart" becomes equated with "I know about God and Christ by looking into my heart." On the other hand, some evangelicals today are being influenced by process theology's emphasis on the present rather than the past as the arena of God's self-disclosure. If the character of God can only be known as it develops in interaction with history today, then the focus of attention is no longer on what God revealed about himself in the ancient book, the Bible, but on how God is adapting to current events.

Either way, one is encouraged to look in or around oneself but not back into history. After all, our salvation is based not on knowing facts from ancient history but on knowing Christ today as he reveals himself in our personal histories as our personal Lord and Savior. Such a turn to the present as the central focus not only of religious experience but also of religious epistemology is a long-standing characteristic of liberalism as well.²⁵

Even more pervasive, however, is the new evangelical pneumatology. Heavily influenced by certain wings of the charismatic movement, many evangelicals argue that passages such as John 16 and 1 Corinthians 2 advocate a view of the Spirit as the one responsible for telling us what the Bible teaches. Thus when in doubt or when it really matters one can simply turn to God himself for an understanding of what the Bible really teaches. The Spirit is our exegete, and anyone who has the Spirit need not worry about the twenty-three different kinds of genitives in *koine* Greek. God's word is open and understandable to anyone who has the Spirit of God dwelling within. After all, evangelicals have taken as one of their banners of self-identity the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. In regard to the Bible, this priesthood is now taken to guarantee all believers a Spirit-inspired understanding of the text.²⁶ Such a turn to the Spirit for exegetical certainty and even novel understandings of the Bible is of course also a very common move within theological liberalism.²⁷

²⁵See e.g. K. Barth's insightful analysis of Schleiermacher in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1973) 425-473.

²⁶See Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism* 57. M. A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986) 151, notes how in the past this Reformation teaching has been used by evangelicals to support an egalitarian, democratic approach to Scripture. Noll is careful to point out, however, that the democratic approach to Scripture that evangelicals derive from this principle was not characteristic of the Reformers themselves. And of course the Reformers strongly resisted any form of enthusiasm in regard to understanding the Bible.

²⁷A recent example of this is the statement of one of the priests of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts in support of the resolution that their church bless the relationships of gay and lesbian couples. The lay delegates in the convention asked: "What does the Bible say about this?" But the Rev.

Finally, evangelicals are increasingly unwilling to study the Bible because for many the Bible is no longer the primary locus of nor criterion for evaluating divine revelation *per se*. Instead the experience of God's people in the present is the most reliable guide for what God is like and how he acts in the world. The paradigm of revelation is thus no longer the Bible as a fixed canon but the experiences of the poor and oppressed, or the feminist critique of society, or in the same way the experiences of gold-standard, supply-side economists and upper-middle-class whites. Hence once again the hard work of exegeting the Bible is no longer felt to be as existentially relevant as our own experiences, which—once understood and internalized—will give us the paradigms we need to understand Scripture. So we now increasingly begin where traditional hermeneutics ended: with our own problems and perspectives. After all, evangelicals too are convinced that presuppositionless exegesis is impossible.

V. THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US

It seems apparent, therefore, that evangelicals are increasingly unwilling to take up the task of Biblical studies still demanded by the structure and curriculum requirements of most evangelical seminaries for both cultural and now also theological reasons. It also seems apparent that, in the face of such overwhelming cultural and theological forces, liberal and post-neo-orthodox institutions have little chance of restructuring their entire identity in such a radical manner. Today's cultural and theological climate seemingly will not allow such a move. If evangelicals are less and less convinced of the value of exegesis and Biblical theology culturally and theologically in spite of their theological heritage, then what chance do liberal institutions have to regain the centrality of Scripture in view of their theological heritage?

In such a situation the only hope for those institutions that desire to have and keep the study of the Bible at the center of the curriculum is to draw sharp lines of demarcation in the curriculum that recognize the conflict before us and take a stand in favor of the classical theological curriculum. This will demand that such seminaries clarify their theology on the key issues of the doctrine of God, the role of the Spirit, and the locus of authoritative revelation in the world. It will also demand that they hammer out their hermeneutical commitments and take a stand on issues of methodology. The most basic questions need to be answered afresh: Why study the Bible? How should the Bible be studied? These are questions that can no longer be ignored. In short, seminaries must regain a sense of their institutional commitments and have the courage to reflect these commitments in their curriculum.

The need for courage, based on sound and well-thought-through theological and methodological commitments, is not suggested lightly. A commitment (requirement) to study the Scriptures historically and a seminary's

E. W. Cockrell, chairman of the diocesan liturgical commission, stated: "The Spirit has given us a new understanding of sexuality." The majority of lay delegates rejected the resolution; the clergy supported it. See "Episcopalians Reject Measure to Bless Gay Couples," *The Boston Globe* (Sunday, November 15, 1987) 33, 46.

demand that theology, ethics, mission, preaching and pastoral care all flow out of sound exegetical conclusions, won through the grinding work of reading the Bible in its original languages and historical contexts, will appear to many to be elitist, filled with the pride of intellectualism, and perhaps even racist. This is especially true in view of the new trend of second-career seminarians. To others it will appear too time-consuming, impractical and irrelevant in the face of the serious issues that surround us. Still others will argue that such a Scripture-centered curriculum strikes at the very heart of an egalitarianism that many falsely equate with the gospel and our cherished Protestant heritage. And, finally, there will be those who refuse to participate in our programs because of sincere but erroneous theological positions.

Thus seminaries must be ready to think hard and long about why they would want such a curriculum in the first place. Only those seminaries that can communicate their unpopular convictions clearly and persuasively with prospective students and with the Church in a sort of "pre-education" will be able to overcome the initial shock of such a rigorous and old-fashioned approach to theological studies.

As we approach the end of the twentieth century, seminaries in general—and especially evangelical seminaries—are therefore faced with a challenge that can only be met principally. As B. B. Warfield put it almost a century ago:

A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it. . . . And a high view of the functions of the ministry on evangelical lines inevitably produces a high conception of the training which is needed to prepare men for the exercise of these high functions.²⁸

We must know where we are going and why, and we must consciously reflect these decisions in our curricula. Only such a stand taken on principles, rather than on expediency or tradition, can stand up against the forces that now speak against it. To quote Warfield once again:

If the functions of the minister come to be conceived lowly: if the minister comes to be thought of, for example, fundamentally as merely the head of a social organization from whom may be demanded pleasant manners and executive ability; or as little more than a zealous "promoter" who knows how to seek out and attach to his enterprise a multitude of men; or as merely an entertaining lecturer who can be counted upon to charm away an hour or two of dull Sabbaths; or even—for here we have, of course, an infinitely higher conception—as merely an enthusiastic Christian eager to do work for Christ . . . we might as well close our theological seminaries . . . and seek recruits for the ministry among the capable young fellows about town. The "three R's" will constitute all the literary equipment they require; their English Bible their whole theological outfit; and zeal their highest spiritual attainment.²⁹

²⁸B. B. Warfield, "Our Seminary Curriculum," in *Selected Shorter Writings* (ed. J. E. Meeter; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 1. 369. I am indebted to my colleague T. D. Gordon for this source and the address by S. Miller (see n. 30).

²⁹Warfield, "Seminary" 369-370.

This brings us back, therefore, to the question of competence with which we began. The challenge before seminaries today is to define carefully what they deem to be the role of the minister and how the potential minister can best be trained for that role. Only when we know what our students should be able to do will we be able to assist them in their preparation to do it. Our curricula must reflect these carefully concluded and supported convictions about the identity and function of the ministry.

Historically, evangelical seminaries have reflected such a conviction in their decision to make the serious, historical study of Scripture the center of their curricula.³⁰ Now the time has come to reevaluate our prior commitments and to reaffirm them. Evangelical seminaries must muster up the courage to reaffirm unashamedly that the center of the theological curriculum is the exegesis of the Scriptures and then be willing to support such a conviction both hermeneutically and theologically. Other schools face the formidable challenge of redirecting their curricula. We face the challenge of reestablishing our priorities.

But reestablish them we must, if we intend to keep them. The cultural and theological forces now unleashed against a Bible-centered curriculum are of such a magnitude that change is inevitable if the structure of our classes and the structure of our requirements are allowed to follow the path of least resistance. The new pietism now facing evangelicals is just as destructive as the dry rationalism of a previous generation. But the primary danger facing evangelicalism today is not the threat of an arid intellectualism. Nor is it the wave of our culture's future.³¹ As Warfield again so insightfully pointed out, however, the result of these strange bedfellows is the same:

Extremes meet. Pietist and Rationalist have ever hunted in couples and dragged down their quarry together. They may differ as to why they deem theology mere lumber, and would not have the prospective minister waste his time in acquiring it. The one loves God so much, the other loves him so little, that he does not care to know him. But they agree that it is not worth while to learn to know him. The simple English Bible seems to the one sufficient equipment for the minister, because, in the fervor of his religious enthusiasm, it seems to him enough for the renovating of the world, just to lip its precious words to man. . . . If the whole function of the minister is "inspirational" rather than "instructional," and his work is finished when the religious nature of man is roused to action, and the

³⁰See for example the address delivered in 1812 by S. Miller on the occasion of the inauguration of A. Alexander as the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary entitled "*The Duty of the Church to Take Measures for Providing an Able and Faithful Ministry*" (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1984). Miller argued that in addition to piety and ability those called to the pastoral ministry must have a "competent knowledge," without which "both piety and talents united are inadequate to the official work" (p. 9). From Miller's perspective, at the heart of the pastoral calling was the readiness, "on all occasions, to explain the scriptures." This is the minister's "first and chief work" (p. 10). Miller thus argued that the Church had a duty to provide a seminary training in which the student acquired "a large amount of knowledge," including among other things the Biblical languages, Jewish and Christian antiquities, ancient geography and customs, Church history, moral philosophy, and systematic theology (see pp. 11-12). But the various fields of study had a hierarchical relationship to one another, and all were focused on the central goal of enabling "their possessor the better to understand the scriptures, and the better to defend the gospel" (p. 12).

³¹Hofstadter, *Anti-intellectualism* 19, 21, 307.

religious emotions are set surging, with only a very vague notion of the objects to which the awakened religious affections should turn, or the ends to which the religious activities, once set in motion, should be directed—why, then, no doubt we may dispense with all serious study of Scripture, and content ourselves with the employment of its grand music merely to excite religious susceptibilities.³²

The challenge before us is thus the challenge to rekindle our students' willingness to study the Scriptures. But to do so we must be able to show them the value of such a study for piety, devotion, ministry, counseling, mission, ethics, and theological formulation. And we must insist on the integration of the study of Scripture with all other theological disciplines. Moreover this value and insistence must be modeled both in the lives of those who teach in seminaries and in the curricula of the seminaries in which they teach. In short, the challenge before us is to practice what we preach.

VI. EVANGELICALISM'S INEVITABLE DECISION

Evangelical seminary education is at a crossroads. We suffer a crisis at our roots. The question of competence that we now face must be answered with a clearly formulated response, one way or the other. But it must be answered. As Hunter's study makes clear, evangelicalism's participation in modernity has allowed it to survive thus far, but it also threatens to destroy the very theological orthodoxy that has characterized evangelicalism in the past.³³ The cure has spawned a disease. And both this participation and this threat are escalating among the coming generation of evangelical leaders. As Hunter points out: "When it is allowed, as it is increasingly so in Evangelicalism, to interpret the Bible subjectivistically . . . the Scriptures are divested of their authority to compel obedience" (p. 184).

It cannot be denied that evangelical seminaries today face enormous pressure as a result of the initial stages of this erosion of Biblical authority. The question before us is whether evangelical seminaries can meet the cultural and theological grounds of unwillingness with an aggressive proposal for the renewal of their traditional commitment to the study of the Bible as the heart of theological education. The history of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy and their institutions provides a good example of what will happen if we do not do so. The alternatives are clear. The future identity of evangelicalism is at stake. And that future will be determined to a large degree by which alternative evangelical seminaries choose.

³²Warfield, "Seminary" 371-372.

³³This is being recognized even at the popular level. See e.g. J. Johnston, *Will Evangelicalism Survive Its Own Popularity?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980). Johnston points to evangelicalism's hedonism, narcissism and self-worship, and materialism as some of the central characteristics of contemporary evangelicalism that threaten its very existence. For more scholarly treatments of the history, nature and problems of evangelicalism see *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (ed. G. Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); *The Evangelical Tradition in America* (ed. L. I. Sweet; Macon: Mercer University, 1984); *The Evangelicals* (ed. Wells and Woodbridge); G. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).