

MILLARD J. ERICKSON: BAPTIST AND EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIAN*

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The evangelical movement in America during the past four decades has basically been a transdenominational movement. Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry are more evangelical than Baptist. The same can be said for many others. J. Dobson is more of an evangelical than a Nazarene, M. Noll more of an evangelical than a Presbyterian, and R. Sider more of an evangelical than a Brethren. Some have even questioned if one can be an evangelical and be a loyal denominationalist. Millard J. Erickson, by contrast, has not only become the most outstanding writing theologian in the evangelical world but also has remained a loyal Baptist.

Erickson's heritage is firmly rooted in Baptist life. This heritage, inherited from his Swedish grandparents, combined with his early attraction to "new evangelical" theologians like Henry, B. Ramm and particularly E. J. Carnell, has resulted in a new model for evangelical theologians.¹ The new model is certainly evangelical but is simultaneously rooted in denominational commitments. In this article we shall examine the context out of which Erickson's theology has developed. We shall focus our attention on his major contributions to Baptist and evangelical theology—namely, his concern for theological method and his articulation of the doctrine of Scripture. Other matters of significance in Erickson's theology will be surveyed, followed by a brief analysis and evaluation.

I. SHAPERS OF ERICKSON'S THEOLOGY

In 1963 Erickson finished writing his doctoral dissertation on the theology of Henry, Ramm and Carnell. He revised it and published it under the title *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood: Revell, 1968). Although since that time Erickson has authored or edited ten books, numerous articles and reviews, as well as several book chapters for symposiums, it is his first book and his impressive three-volume *Christian*

* This article is adapted from the forthcoming volume on *Baptist Theologians*, edited by David S. Dockery and Timothy F. George (Nashville: Broadman, 1990).

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¹ Most of the material in this initial section is drawn from several telephone conversations in November 1988. Also see the helpful material in L. R. Keylock, "Evangelical Leaders You Should Know: Meet Millard J. Erickson," *Moody Monthly* (June 1987) 71-73.

Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–1985), which has become the standard systematic theology text in many colleges and seminaries, that have elevated Erickson to the front rank of evangelical theologians. His theological interests are many as evidenced not only by his previous work but also by his current projects focusing on third-world theology, process theology, black theology, Christology, and contemporary linguistic analysis.

Beyond these accomplishments, however, he is primarily a churchman. He continues to serve interim pastorates, having done so in almost forty churches in the past twenty-five years. He is in demand as a speaker and serves on important denominational committees and boards. For almost two decades Erickson has been active in Baptist work outside of his own denomination, serving on positions with the Baptist World Alliance and lecturing at various Baptist seminaries.²

Erickson's theological thought and method have been shaped by his Baptist beliefs and practice. Beyond that he has been influenced by his commitment to the Church, his apologetic orientation adopted from Ramm and Carnell, and his desire to relate theology to contemporary forms of thinking so as to be both Biblical and relevant. Erickson, however, is not a disciple (in the technical sense) of any particular theologian or theological school. By his own admission, however, it was the writings of Carnell, particularly *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), that shaped the apologetic orientation of his theology.³ It is important to note that Carnell, Ramm and Henry, the formative thinkers of the new evangelical theology, were all Baptists—who were, however, evangelicals first and Baptists second. Erickson's Baptist heritage and commitments have both directly and indirectly taken a higher priority in his life and in shaping his theology.⁴

Yet although he is indebted to Baptist theologians like J. Gill, E. Y. Mullins, and particularly A. H. Strong, it cannot be said that Erickson's theology is necessarily consciously and distinctively Baptist. Erickson claims that his theology is intended to be broad in hopes of influencing an audience beyond the world of Baptists. His work is Baptist in its shape in the sense that it grows out of his church experience and commitments.⁵ In this he is not unlike theological giants K. Barth and P. Tillich, who were not Baptists but whose understanding of the theological task was largely influenced by their pastoral arenas. Erickson claims that Baptists, unlike the Lutherans (who have Luther) or the Presbyterians (who have Calvin) or the Methodists (who have Wesley), have “no one shining light” and in some sense do theology from “an ideological ghetto.”⁶ Erickson believes that a theology emphasizing Biblical themes with a corresponding com-

² Ibid.

³ Conversation, November 1988.

⁴ Ibid. Also see W. C. Young's observation at this point in his review of *The New Evangelical Theology* in *Foundations* 12 (1969) 95–96.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

mitment to the Church will produce a theology emphasizing Baptist themes.⁷

Erickson's theology has also been shaped by his mentors. From W. Hordern he received a concern for clarity of thought as well as a writing style worthy of emulation. From W. Pannenberg he learned to grapple fairly with differing positions. Erickson has only the highest praise for his teachers and claims that it is a demanding exercise to interact with Pannenberg, who "is in a league by himself."⁸ But from the beginning his work has been largely shaped by the influences of the new evangelicals.

II. CONTEXT OF ERICKSON'S THEOLOGY

Out of the bitter fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the twentieth century emerged a theological movement known as the new evangelicalism.⁹ With roots in the Reformation, evangelicalism reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, however, evangelicalism went into a temporary eclipse. The success of the previous century resulted in a material prosperity, a loyalty to the nation that was confused with Christian commitment, and an overemphasis on individualism that hampered the advancement of evangelicalism. The flood of new ideas such as Darwinian evolution, German higher criticism, Freudian psychology, Marxist socialism, and an overarching naturalism undermined confidence in the truthfulness of the Bible and the reality of the supernatural. These ideological changes, resulting in the modernist-fundamentalist controversies and coupled with the blood baths of two World Wars, brought new challenges as well as new opportunities. Out of this void developed the new evangelicalism, a term coined by H. J. Ockenga in 1947.¹⁰

In his expert analysis Erickson observed that the new movement took issue with the older fundamentalism.¹¹ The new evangelicalism created a third stream in American Protestantism, running midway between simplistic fundamentalism and the sophisticated faith espoused by the majority of the nation's best-known theologians and denominational leaders. The new evangelical theologians argued that fundamentalism was wrong-headed in its suspicion of all who did not articulate every thought or practice Christianity exactly as the fundamentalists did. Also it had an invalid strategy that produced a strict separatism seeking to produce a totally pure church, both locally and denominationally. Lastly, fundamentalism had produced empty results since it had hardly turned back the tide of liberalism, nor had it impacted the thought worlds of the day

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See M. Erickson, *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood: Revell, 1968).

¹⁰ Ibid. 13-31.

¹¹ Ibid. 31-45. In an interesting observation R. Hammer observes that American evangelicalism could be identified with British fundamentalism, pointing out the distinctions between the American and British scenes. See Hammer's review of *The New Evangelical Theology* in *ExpTim* 81 (1970) 109-110.

or dealt with the social problems of its time.¹² Carnell insisted further that fundamentalism was orthodoxy gone cultic because its convictions were not linked with the historic creeds of the Church, being more of a mentality than a movement.¹³ Henry contended that fundamentalists did not present Christianity as an overarching worldview but concentrated instead on only part of the message. The fundamentalists were too other-worldly, anti-intellectual and unwilling to bring their faith to bear upon culture and social life.¹⁴

The new movement emphasized several important themes such as social ethics, apologetical theology, evangelism, education and Christian unity. Erickson noted that the movement sought unity on the basis of Biblical doctrine. One of the goals of the movement was to restate the faith in a way that would command intellectual respect and heal the schism between the theological right and the left, at least to the point to where meaningful theological dialogue could be pursued.¹⁵ These themes and emphases have characterized Erickson's own theological pilgrimage as evidenced in *Christian Theology* and can be summarized as

a set of concerns and attitudes related to the needs of the present day, in continuity with vital orthodoxy of the past, and generally distinguishable from later fundamentalism, coupled with an orthodox Christology and an orthodox view of the scriptures.¹⁶

Let us now examine the important emphases in Erickson's theology.

III. METHOD OF ERICKSON'S THEOLOGY

Erickson suggests that the study or science of God is a good preliminary or basic definition of theology.¹⁷ But beyond that it can be said that theology is "that discipline which strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily upon the Scriptures, placed in the context of culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to issues of life."¹⁸ Theology then is Biblical, systematic, related to the issues of general culture and learning, contemporary, and practical.

One of the outstanding contributions that Erickson has made for the evangelical and Baptist worlds in which he serves is his development of

¹² Erickson, *New Evangelical Theology* 22-30.

¹³ See E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959).

¹⁴ See C. F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).

¹⁵ See S. Heavenor's review of *The New Evangelical Theology* in *SJT* 24 (1971) 355-357.

¹⁶ As summarized in a review of Erickson's work by R. N. Longenecker in *Christianity Today* 13 (October 11, 1968) 19-20. All reviews of Erickson's initial work were quite positive. The issues that were raised tended to focus around the definition of evangelicalism. In addition to Longenecker see C. C. Ryrie's review in *BibSac* 126 (1969) 81-82 and R. P. Martin's in *EvQ* 42 (1970) 57-58.

¹⁷ M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1. 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

theological method. His process of doing theology is thoroughly grounded in Scripture, but it moves far beyond a simple proof-texting approach to theology. Also, while being thoroughly Biblical his theology is contextually relevant. His methodology attempts to bridge the gap between the then and the now, a concern that developed in his pastoral days in Chicago.

Erickson acknowledges that there is a sense in which theology is an art as well as a science so that it cannot follow a rigid structure. Yet procedures can be suggested. For Erickson, Biblical theology is developed before systematic theology so that the sequence is exegesis—Biblical theology—systematic theology.¹⁹ Erickson suggests nine steps in the process of doing theology.

1. *Collection of Biblical materials.* Involved in this initial step is not only the gathering of all the relevant Biblical passages on the doctrine being investigated but also an awareness of one's own presuppositions in interpreting these materials. Beyond this, Erickson notes the importance of knowing the presuppositions of the writers of reference books that might be used. Likewise narrative texts as well as the didactic passages of Scripture should be used.

2. *Unification of the Biblical materials.* This means taking into account the whole of Scripture when trying to find a common theme. Forced harmonizations should be avoided.

3. *Analysis of the meaning of Biblical teachings.* After attempting to find the common teaching on a subject, these texts must be analyzed by asking, "What is really meant by this?" The theologian must seek to put the meaning of the Bible into clear and understandable language.

4. *Examination of historical treatments.* A recognition that we are not the first generation to examine a particular teaching will provide insight beyond our own viewpoint. It reminds us that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us and helps us to ask the right questions of the text. Perhaps as helpful as anything, this step, suggests Erickson, calls for a measure of humility in presenting our conclusions.

5. *Identification of the essence of the doctrine.* Many Biblical truths are bound up within the culture and context in which they are communicated. This does not mean dismissing the "cultural baggage." It does mean, for example, separating what Paul said to the Philippians as first-century Christians living in Philippi from what he said to them as Christians. Similarly the sacrificial system in Leviticus is not the essence of the doctrine of the atonement. What is the essence is the concept that there must be vicarious sacrifice for the sins of humankind.

6. *Illumination from sources beyond the Bible.* The point of this step is the recognition that God has revealed himself through general revelation

¹⁹ Ibid., 1. 66.

as well as through special revelation. The Bible is the primary source for Christian theology, but it is not the only source. Erickson, consistent with his new evangelical heritage, suggests that experience and the sciences may add clarity where the Bible sheds little or no light. It is important to recognize that general (universal) revelation and special (particular) revelation are ultimately in harmony when both are properly interpreted.

7. *Contemporary expression of the doctrine.* The theologian must be mindful not only of the Biblical message but also the contemporary context or situation in which the doctrine is being communicated. Both horizons must be observed. Yet any theology designed only to meet the moods or issues of a particular time will quickly find itself outdated. Truths that can remain faithful to the Biblical message and can communicate across different contexts, cultures, or traditions will be enduring.

8. *Development of a central interpretive motif.* Like all coherent theologians, Erickson maintains that a particular theme or perspective should be formulated so that the various doctrines can be seen in relationship with one another. Yet he warns that a central motif should never be used where it is not relevant, nor should eisegesis be used to make a Biblical teaching fit a particular system.

9. *Stratification of the topics.* The final step in Erickson's method is an attempt to determine what issues are major topics and what issues are subtopics. The doctrine of the second coming is a major topic, while the question of the timing of the rapture is less important and certainly less emphasized in Scripture. An outline should then be made to help see the relationship of the importance of one teaching to another and to arrange the topics on the basis of their relative importance.²⁰

Erickson develops his theology around the central motif of the "magnificence of God."²¹ This motif provides a sense of coherence to his system. Magnificence is understood as encompassing what has traditionally been associated with the expression "the glory of God," but without the connotation of self-centeredness sometimes carried by that expression.

Erickson is not unaware of the problems involved in contextualizing the theological message, in developing a central motif, or in communicating these matters through religious language. While wrestling with these matters he opts for restating the classical themes of systematic theology without becoming overly creative so as not to overstep Biblical revelation. He understands the difference between doctrine and theology and recognizes the need of permanence. His method lends an overall healthy balance to his systematic approach.

²⁰ Ibid., 1. 66-79.

²¹ Ibid., 1. 78.

IV. DISTINCTIVES OF ERICKSON'S THEOLOGY

1. *Revelation.* Consistent with his new evangelical heritage, Erickson presents God's universal and particular revelation in complete harmony with one another. Consequently there can never be any conflict between the Bible properly interpreted and natural knowledge correctly construed. If all the data were available, Erickson maintains that a perfect harmony would emerge. This implies that it is possible to exhibit the truthfulness of the Biblical view by appealing to evidence drawn from the created space-time universe.²²

This conception of revelation also produces a positive attitude toward culture, and thus his theology is culture-affirming rather than culture-rejecting. There is therefore a possibility of some knowledge of divine truth outside of special revelation. Erickson contends that God's universal or general revelation should be considered a supplement to, not a substitute for, special revelation.²³

Because of God's universal revelation, Erickson believes that God is just in condemning those who have never heard the gospel in the full and formal sense. He amplifies:

No one is completely without opportunity. All have known God; if they have not effectually perceived him, it is because they have suppressed the truth. Thus all are responsible. This increases the motivation of missionary endeavor, for no one is innocent. All need to believe in God's offer of grace, and the message needs to be taken to them.²⁴

Erickson distinguishes between God's universal and particular revelation. On the one hand, universal revelation "is God's communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places."²⁵ On the other hand, God's particular revelation involves "God's manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him."²⁶ Particular revelation is available now only by consultation of sacred Scripture. Universal revelation is inferior to special revelation, both in the clarity of the treatment and the range of subjects considered. The insufficiency of the universal revelation requires special revelation. Yet because special revelation builds upon the universal, special revelation requires universal revelation as well.²⁷ Erickson not only proposes the complementary nature of special and general revelation but also opts for a "both/and" answer to the question of personal or propositional revelation.²⁸

²² Ibid., 1. 175-181.

²³ Ibid., 1. 173.

²⁴ Ibid., 1. 174. Also see M. J. Erickson, "Hope for Those Who Haven't Yet Heard? Yes, but . . .," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 2 (1975) 122-126.

²⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1. 153.

²⁶ Ibid., 1. 153-154, 175.

²⁷ Ibid., 1. 176-177.

²⁸ Ibid., 1. 191-196.

2. *Scripture*. Since revelation includes propositional truths, it is of such a nature that it can be preserved, written down, or inscripturated. Revelation is God's communication to humankind of the truth that they need to know in order to relate properly to God. Since God does not repeat his revelation for each person, there has to be some way to preserve it. Erickson differentiates between revelation and inspiration by noting that revelation is the communication of divine truth from God to humanity whereas inspiration relates more to the relaying of that truth from the first recipients of it to other persons, whether then or later. "Thus, revelation might be thought of as a vertical action, and inspiration as a horizontal matter."²⁹

Erickson wrestles with the issues involved in formulating a theory of inspiration, even raising the question of the legitimacy of doing so. He interacts with various theories and methods of formulating a theory of inspiration. He concludes that it is possible to formulate a model of inspiration. To do so he suggests that the Church should construct its view of the inspiration of the Bible by emphasizing the teachings of the Bible regarding its own inspiration while giving an important but secondary place to the phenomena of Scripture.³⁰

Erickson maintains that inspiration involved God's directing the thoughts of the writers so that they were precisely the thoughts that he wished expressed. At times these thoughts were quite specific, while at other times they were more general. When they were more general, God wanted that particular degree of specificity recorded and no more. He contends that this specificity can even extend to the choice of words but does not necessarily become dictation.³¹

Erickson concludes that God's Word is inspired, thus preserving God's special revelation. Inspiration is God's way of assuring that his inscripturated word will not be lost but rather will be conveyed to his people in all ages. The result of inspiration assures God's people that the Bible is truthful, trustworthy and reliable.³² Likewise the Bible has the right to command belief or action, but this should not be equated with a forced compliance. The Bible is authoritative because it is the dependable Word of God.³³

The dependability of God's Word assures that the Bible is fully truthful in all its teaching. The theological term for this is inerrancy, which Erickson defines as follows: "The Bible, when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written, and in view of the purposes for

²⁹ Ibid., 1. 200.

³⁰ Ibid., 1. 207-210. See M. J. Erickson, "Implications of Biblical Inerrancy for the Christian Mission," in *Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987) 223-236.

³¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1. 217.

³² Ibid., 1. 221-240.

³³ Ibid., 1. 242-244.

which it was given, is fully truthful in all that it affirms.”³⁴ Erickson contends that inerrancy, while not directly taught in Scripture, is the proper implication of the Bible’s own teaching about itself. He claims that while inerrancy can be misunderstood it must be maintained and argues for its importance theologically, historically and epistemologically.³⁵

He carefully avoids building his case on the “domino theory.” Thus he does not argue that one error would invalidate all other Biblical teachings. Yet he points out that if there are errors in Scripture it would surely make it more difficult to show why we should believe those things taught in it. His view seeks to include and account for the phenomenological language of Scripture. Erickson suggests that the Christian would be unwise to give up the affirmation: “Whatever the Bible teaches is true.”

3. *God, creation and providence.* Erickson approaches the doctrine of God from the perspectives of “what God is like”³⁶ and “what God does.”³⁷ These discussions are investigated from an orthodox trinitarian perspective. He chooses God’s majesty as the central focus when dealing with the attributes of God. He suggests that this, rather than glory, is a more appropriate way of describing God’s greatness. After skillfully evaluating the various ways of dealing with God’s attributes he opts for the categories of greatness and goodness.³⁸ His conclusions on these matters are in line with classical formulations, though they are nuanced to account for the Biblical data and the challenges of process theology.³⁹

Erickson deals with “God’s plan” (traditionally defined as decrees) from a moderately Calvinistic model. He valiantly seeks to correlate human freedom and divine sovereignty.⁴⁰ This balance and consistency is generally reflected in his doctrine of salvation as well.

In line with Ramm and Carnell, *Christian Theology* in vols. 1 and 2 adopts a progressive creationist position.⁴¹ He believes that the Hebrew word for “day” (*yôm*) can mean a long period of time. Rejecting the “flood theory” on the one hand and “macroevolutionism” on the other, Erickson still strongly defends the historicity of the Biblical Adam and Eve.⁴²

4. *Humanity and sin.* Similar to both Luther and Calvin, Erickson opts for a structural and substantive understanding of the image of God⁴³

³⁴ Ibid., 1. 233-234.

³⁵ Ibid., 1. 225-229.

³⁶ Ibid., 1. 263.

³⁷ Ibid., 1. 345.

³⁸ Ibid., 1. 266-267.

³⁹ Ibid., 1. 267-300. E.g. “God and time” (pp. 274-275), “constancy” (pp. 278-281), “faithfulness” (pp. 291-292), “love” (pp. 292-294), “love and justice” (pp. 297-298).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1. 345-363.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1. 378-386.

⁴² Ibid., 2. 473-493. In our phone conversation in November 1988, Erickson suggests that flood geologists try to defend what is not required by Scripture to defend. This is considered “overbelief” on their part.

⁴³ Ibid., 2. 512-514.

while tentatively suggesting a "conditional unity" as the best way to describe the constitutional nature of humankind.⁴⁴

In some of his most creative work he develops a full chapter on the universality of humanity, extending to all races, both sexes, all economic classes and all ages as well as the unborn and unmarried.⁴⁵ Additionally he fully treats the social dimensions of sin.⁴⁶

Erickson defines sin as "any lack of conformity, active or passive, to the moral law."⁴⁷ Sin is seen in terms of its negative effects on the sinner and the sinner's relation to others, in addition to the separation of one's relationship with God. The essence of sin is simply a failure to let God be God.⁴⁸ Regarding the transmission of sin he opts for a conditional imputation calibrated according to the level of responsibility and maturity in one's life. He says that "human beings, while inheriting both a corrupted nature and guilt, first become guilty when they accept or approve of their corrupted nature."⁴⁹

Perhaps motivated by his Baptist and pietistic concerns he maintains that salvation requires a conscious and voluntary decision on our part. While suggesting that infants and children begin life with both the corrupted nature and guilt that are the consequences of sin, he nevertheless says that our Lord does not regard them as basically sinful and guilty. Thus the act that ends childish innocence is every bit as voluntary as the act of accepting the offer of salvation at the age of moral responsibility.⁵⁰

5. *Christ, the Spirit, and salvation.* His Christology reflects a thoroughgoing commitment to Chalcedon with attempts to translate the meaning of Chalcedon for contemporary hearers.⁵¹ Erickson is extremely dependent on the fourth gospel in developing his Christology while obviously aware of issues surrounding the contemporary and critical discussion.⁵² The Christological titles are thoughtfully treated, but their significance is not fully developed.

The work of Christ is treated around the themes of "revealer," "reconciler" and "ruler."⁵³ The various models of the atonement receive comprehensive attention, but primacy is given to the penal substitution model. Following his moderate Calvinism he rejects particular redemption in favor of a universal atonement with limited efficacy. The decision

⁴⁴ Ibid., 2. 536-539.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2. 541-559.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2. 641-658.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2. 578.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2. 580.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2. 639.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2. 636-639.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2. 734-738.

⁵² M. J. Erickson, "Christology from Above and Christology from Below: A Study of Contrasting Methodologies," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. K. S. Kantzer and S. N. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 43-55.

⁵³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2. 762-769.

accounts for a larger segment of the Biblical witness with less distortion than does the theory of particular redemption.⁵⁴ Among the most impressive of the Biblical statements for Erickson in this regard is 1 Tim 4:10, which affirms that the living God "is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe."⁵⁵ Apparently the Savior has done something for all persons, though it is less in degree than what he has done for those who believe.⁵⁶

In one of his more controversial conclusions Erickson suggests that Jesus' resurrected body did not undergo complete transformation until the ascension.⁵⁷ The point of this statement is not to detract from the resurrection but somehow to give significance to the ascension. In a cautious and hypothetical manner Erickson attempts to deal with the Biblical teaching (Luke 24; John 20; 1 Corinthians 15) in such a way that the initial resurrection is somehow distinct from the glorified body of the ascended and exalted Lord.⁵⁸ This results in considering the forty days as a time similar to a resuscitation, like that of Lazarus. The eating with the disciples may have been out of a need to eat rather than a concession while with them. It must be remembered that Erickson suggests this only as a hypothesis and cautiously concludes:

But just as the virgin birth should not be thought of as essentially a biological matter, neither should the resurrection be conceived of as primarily a physical fact. It was the triumph of Jesus over sin and death and all of the attendant ramifications. It was the fundamental step in his exaltation—he was freed from the curse brought on him by his voluntary bearing of the sin of the entire human race.⁵⁹

The work of Christ applied by the Spirit to the believer ultimately brings about the restoration of a proper relationship with God. For Erickson, the Spirit of God initiates the Christian life through regeneration and conversion and continues with empowering, illuminating, teaching, sanctifying, and the granting of spiritual gifts.⁶⁰ His conception of salvation follows a moderate Calvinistic *ordo salutis*. Yet he goes against his usual Calvinistic tendencies, opting for the temporal priority of conversion to regeneration.⁶¹

6. *Church and eschatology.* Concerning the organization of the church, Erickson clearly favors congregational polity but with care "since the evidence from the New Testament is inconclusive."⁶²

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2. 811-823.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 2. 834-835.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2. 777.

⁵⁸ The point was strongly stressed in our phone conversation in November 1988.

⁵⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2. 777.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3. 872-877. Erickson suggests that it is difficult to determine whether the contemporary phenomena are authentic. He decides that charismata are sovereignly given and not to be sought.

⁶¹ Ibid., 3. 932.

⁶² Ibid., 3. 1084.

His baptistic commitments are quite obvious in his discussion of the Church. He sees baptism as a token, an outward testimony or symbol of the inward change that has been effected in the believer.⁶³ Regarding the mode of baptism, immersion is affirmed, though without dogmatism since he demonstrates openness to other modes.⁶⁴ The Lord's Supper is a time of relationship and communion with Christ. In the celebration the Christian community comes with confidence to meet the risen Christ, for Christ has promised to meet with his people. The sacrament should be thought of "not so much in terms of Christ's presence as in terms of his promise and the potential for a closer relationship with him."⁶⁵

While emphasizing the local church, Erickson strongly affirms the universal Church of God. Beyond this he recognizes the Church as only one manifestation of the kingdom. He argues passionately for the unity of the Church and rejects fundamentalists' emphasis regarding separation that tends to lead to division.⁶⁶

Erickson's eschatology follows the line of a classical historic premillennialism.⁶⁷ An awareness of the apocalyptic elements in the Biblical teaching concerning heaven and hell and other areas of eschatology, including the messianic banquet of Revelation 19, is demonstrated. Yet in no way does he hint at any form of universalism.⁶⁸

V. EVALUATION OF ERICKSON'S THEOLOGY

1. *Strengths.* Erickson's contribution to the theological enterprise is a significant milestone in Baptist and evangelical thought. His careful work evidences diligent research, critical argumentation and a spiritually sensitive understanding of the Biblical materials. His theology is of immense importance, and his coherent and centralizing motif pervades the entire work.⁶⁹

Erickson's theology is faithful to his Baptist and evangelical heritage. It is both orthodox and contemporary, yet it is neither faddist nor overly innovative. Generally, at every major issue Erickson's theological construction can be considered Biblical and classical.⁷⁰ The true strength of his work is the overall concern for the Church and his doxological tone.⁷¹

⁶³ Ibid., 3. 1096-1097.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 3. 1104-1105.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3. 1123.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3. 1130-1147.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3. 1206-1224. Also see his extensive discussion of these matters in *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). This book grew out of a request of Bethel Seminary students for a course that would examine thoroughly and objectively eschatological options for today's churches. For evaluations and disagreements with Erickson's conclusions see reviews by A. Hoekema in *CTJ* 13 (1978) 208-211, D. K. Erlandson in *Christian Scholars' Review* 9 (1979) 186-187, R. A. Coughenour in *Reformed Review* 32 (1979) 181-182, and J. Walvoord in *BibSac* 137 (1980) 83-85.

⁶⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3. 1226-1241.

⁶⁹ S. Grenz's review of *Christian Theology* 1 in *Christian Scholars' Review* 16/1 (1986) 93, 96.

⁷⁰ D. S. Dockery's review of *Christian Theology* 1 in *GTJ* 5 (1984) 302-303.

⁷¹ D. S. Dockery's review of *Christian Theology* 2 in *GTJ* 7 (1986) 140-142.

His most noticeable strengths are his balanced theological method, his carefully nuanced view of Scripture, and his concern to relate orthodoxy to the contemporary issues of life. Also he demonstrates the importance of coherence in systematic theology, the virtue of theological humility, and the tension between timeless and timebound Biblical themes.⁷²

He continually reflects an openness to various options and evidences a broad understanding of issues in contemporary theology.⁷³ While his theology is obviously born in a teaching context, it characteristically is irenic, fresh and pastoral.⁷⁴

2. *Weaknesses.* Yet while there is so much to admire in Erickson's work, there are weaknesses that should be noted. For example, his doctrine of Scripture is a model for evangelicals and Baptists,⁷⁵ but there is no discussion of canonicity or the relationship of canon to inspiration, authority, or hermeneutics.

His doctrine of God, which follows the line of Henry, Ramm and Carnell, tends to be rationalistic. He seems to reject paradox in theological thinking and discounts anthropomorphisms in constructing a doctrine of God. His moderate Calvinism, which influences his doctrine of God, has nevertheless been unsatisfying to those with more Arminian tendencies⁷⁶ as well as more strict Calvinists.⁷⁷

Erickson's classical Christology probably will not be satisfying to critical scholars because of its overdependence on a traditional reading of John's gospel. His hypothesis concerning the resurrection and ascension is shaky at best and has not found a welcome response among evangelical or critical scholars.

His Baptist concerns are evident at many places, including his doctrine of salvation and his emphasis on the Church. Yet his openness regarding the mode of baptism seems inconsistent. Similarly, to be faithful to his approach to salvation it would be better not to construct a rigid sequence of events in the development of his *ordo salutis*.⁷⁸

His emphasis on the doctrine of the Church is not, however, well related to his eschatology, thus creating a lack of a theology of history. His view of the Church seems to be emphasized to the exclusion of the kingdom of God.⁷⁹ There is a need to develop the theme of the kingdom of

⁷² R. W. Vunderink's review of *Christian Theology* 3 in *CTJ* 22 (1987) 144.

⁷³ L. R. Bush's review of *Christian Theology* 3 in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1986) 52; C. Chaney's review of *Christian Theology* 2 in *RevExp* 83 (1986) 134-135; R. H. Culpepper's review of *Christian Theology* 3 in *Faith and Mission* 3 (1986) 91-92.

⁷⁴ D. Wells' review of *Christian Theology* in *Eternity* 38 (February 1987) 41; D. Landegent's review of *Christian Theology* 1 in *Reformed Review* 39 (1986) 121.

⁷⁵ Yet F. Howe's review of *Christian Theology* in *BibSac* 143 (1986) 75-76 and those of other more conservative evangelicals have questioned his nuanced understanding of inerrancy.

⁷⁶ Cf. C. Pincock's review of *Christian Theology* in *TSF Bulletin* 9/3 (1986) 29-30.

⁷⁷ Cf. D. Sanders' review of *Christian Theology* 2 in *CTJ* 21 (1986) 111-113.

⁷⁸ A helpful warning in this regard can be found in G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 25-38.

⁷⁹ This is evidenced by the fact that the subject of kingdom is treated as a special problem under the heading of the Church, devoting less than a page to it. See the developed critique in Vunderink's review in *CTJ* 22 (1987) 139-144.

God and the consummation of God's work in history in the new heavens and new earth.⁸⁰

VI. CONCLUSION

Erickson's major contributions as we have noted are the creative construction of his theological methodology and his doctrine of revelation.⁸¹ Overall his theology is Biblical, relevant and practical. He demonstrates an openness to contemporary trends while being fully aware of the centuries of theologizing in the Christian Church. He has managed to interact meaningfully with modern theological developments while remaining faithful to his Baptist and evangelical heritage. The strengths of his work are many, and the weaknesses are few. There is room for improvement in Erickson's theology, but to this date there is no finer evangelical theological work available. His work is more encompassing than that of D. Bloesch and less intimidating than that of C. Henry, less daring than that of H. Berkhof and much less defensive than traditional evangelical theologies such as those of L. Berkhof, J. O. Buswell, L. S. Chafer and C. Hodge. His theology is far more readable than those of A. H. Strong or H. Thielicke and more engaging than that of B. Demarest and G. Lewis. The work is certainly faithful to Baptist emphasis in theology, yet it demonstrates a greater competency and comprehensiveness than do W. T. Conner, E. Y. Mullins, D. Moody or M. Ashcraft. His work is a first-rate achievement. While a Baptist and evangelical theology can probably be done better than Erickson has done it, it must be said that to date no one has done so. We offer our thanksgiving to God for the gift of one of his most gifted teachers to his Church, Millard J. Erickson.

⁸⁰ I have noted in another place that the themes developed in vol. 3 seem to have been treated more hurriedly and less thoughtfully, at least in their relationship to each other, than the themes addressed in vols. 1 and 2; see Dockery's review of *Christian Theology* 3 in *GTJ* 8 (1987) 295-296.

⁸¹ Though some have pointed out the inconsistencies in the application of his method; see B. Demarest's review of *Christian Theology* in *JETS* 29 (1986) 236-237.