

A Conversation with Carl F. H. Henry

By Russell D. Moore

Carl F. H. Henry is the dean of evangelical theologians. He served as the founding editor of Christianity Today and is the author of over thirty-five books, including his widely influential six-volume work, God, Revelation and Authority. Russell D. Moore teaches Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and serves as executive director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement. The Henry Institute cooperated with Crossway Books to make possible the republication of God, Revelation and Authority in 1999. It is now available from Crossway.

Moore: Dr. Henry, two names are at the forefront of the contemporary evangelical movement: Carl Henry and Billy Graham. As you know, Billy Graham recently completed a crusade here in Louisville, for which hundreds of our students and faculty members served as counselors. From your perspective, what is the legacy of Billy Graham for evangelicals in America?

Henry: Evangelicals will never replace Billy Graham. Unless the church finds a full recovery of the evangelistic mandate, evangelicals will find the post-Graham era to be costly indeed. We discover what Billy Graham has always known; that it takes more than money and public relations to carry forward this vision of the gospel for a lost world. I'm optimistic though. It is good to see some of the seminaries, such as Southern Seminary with its Billy Graham School, recovering the missionary duty of all believers.

Moore: You and Dr. Graham were both present on Southern Seminary's campus just a few short years ago, at the inauguration of President Mohler. He is only one of an entire generation of Southern Baptists who have been influenced by your scholarship as an evangelical theologian, firmly committed to the authority and inerrancy of the Bible. In the early days of the postwar evangelical movement, you noted frustration with Southern Baptists because we were so reluctant to join in cooperative efforts with the larger evangelical movement. Now, it seems that, in many ways, Southern Baptists are leading the evangelical movement, or at least its more conservative wing. To what do you attribute this turnaround?

Henry: Southern Baptists have been blessed with vast resources in their attempt to be obedient to the Great Commission. As a matter of fact, the resources of the Southern Baptist Convention and the entire evangelical movement were not too dissimilar at one time. Evangelicals, however, were wary, as were conservative Southern Baptists, of the inroads of modernism in the SBC seminaries, colleges and other facets of Convention life. The collapse of modernism and the reassertion of a commitment to biblical authority within the denomination are significant. It means that God has provided a new opportunity for evangelical renewal within the denomination and beyond. This is why you now see Southern Baptists proudly claiming evangelical identity, and taking on positions of national and global evangelical leadership. The evangelical renewal among Southern Baptists preserves the SBC's historic biblical loyalties while at the same time energizing its evangelistic fervor. For me, this is seen clearly in President Mohler's academic and evangelistic dedication to perpetuating the biblical ideals of the Southern Baptist movement's founders.

Moore: We've used the term "evangelical" several times in this interview, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to define the word, especially when theologians of almost every

conceivable theological stripe seem willing to call themselves “evangelicals.” Is it possible to define “evangelicalism” theologically?

Henry: In 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, the indispensability of biblical theology to a sound doctrinal foundation is placed beyond doubt. An evangelical is one who is Scripture-accordant. Twice, the apostle Paul stipulates faith “according to the Scriptures.” He said this in a context that includes the substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without this dependence on and submission to biblical revelation, there is no evangelicalism.

Moore: But, Dr. Henry, a newer group of “reformist” evangelicals, such as Stanley Grenz, have criticized your view of propositional, verbal revelation. They believe it to be a leftover of Enlightenment rationalism. What are your thoughts on the “communitarian” and postmodern visions of revelation and authority that are being proposed by Grenz and others?

Henry: If evangelicalism is not defined on revelatory grounds, then it wasn’t worth the effort. These critics of propositional revelation are quite subtle in the way they substitute one set of “revelatory propositions” for others. In a half-generation or less, these views will be “also ran” ideas, questing for new alternatives. In fact, postmodernism, which expresses itself in a variety of ways, is already looking for such alternatives to its failed proposals.

Moore: Perhaps the noisiest advocates for evangelical “reform” have been the “open theists,” such as Clark Pinnock and Greg Boyd. They deny that God knows the future free decisions of His creatures, and they argue that God has limited His sovereignty over His creation. Of course, you are in many ways their foil, Dr. Henry, with your view of God, a view that very much reflects the position of historic Christian orthodoxy on God and His attributes. What is at stake for evangelicalism in this debate over the doctrine of God?

Henry: So-called “open theism” is nothing new. It is the latest among many contemporary attempts at theism, which are warped by modern speculative philosophies. A century ago, the addicts of philosophical theism began to espouse modified doctrines of God latched and bolted to a revelational doctrine of God only in certain respects. This is what the open theists have tried as well. Once the sovereignty and exhaustive foreknowledge of God are compromised, much else soon goes with it. At the end, one is not left with a doctrine of God at all. As I said before, if evangelical theology is derived from speculative rather than revelational grounds, then this is the end result.

Moore: Your 1947 book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, had a tremendous impact on the fledgling evangelical movement. In it, you argued against the older fundamentalist tendency to withdraw from the world, seeking only to evangelize individuals and to live separated lives. The question of Christian social and political engagement is now being raised again. Some even look to the public’s reaction to the Clinton scandals of a few years ago and conclude that evangelicals should withdraw from the public square and tend to preaching our gospel, raising our family, and planting our churches. Should 21st century evangelicals still heed the message of *The Uneasy Conscience*?

Henry: The mission of the church is to embrace both evangelism and cultural impact. To neglect either one is catastrophic. This is the lesson of both Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism.

Moore: But, how can evangelicals maintain this balance? How can we be politically engaged without substituting Capitol Hill lobbying campaigns for evangelistic crusades? Or vice-versa?

Henry: The Scripture speaks of a new society and of new persons. A new society presupposes new persons whose sins have been washed in the blood of Jesus. This is what Protestant liberalism missed. Only a regenerate mankind has the resources of the Redeemer to transform humanity. This means a constant emphasis, not just on transforming humanity, but also on the new birth.

Moore: So this means both Capitol Hill and the evangelistic crusade?

Henry: Every way of not doing evangelism is wrong. Every Christian—young or old—is called to evangelize. But the question of a *good conscience* must not be lost in the evangelistic quest. This means being salt and light in the world.

Moore: How then, even in questions of personal morality, do evangelicals escape losing the culture war by joining the other side? In other words, how can we engage the world in what you once called the “twilight of a great civilization” without either unwittingly picking up the values and priorities of a darkening culture, or resorting to the kinds of legalism that characterized the older fundamentalism?

Henry: The Holy Spirit. For evangelicals to find the joy of obedience to their Lord, and the spiritual reward of a walk with the crucified and risen and returning Redeemer, there is no alternative but a dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the renewing agent of God’s distinctive people. The evangelical churches must once again emphasize the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Moore: Dr. Henry, you have mentioned Southern Seminary’s commitment to the Great Commission. The Henry family is no stranger to world missions. In fact, your wife, Helga, has authored a fascinating book on her young life, growing up as a Missionary Kid across the ocean. Many of our Southern Seminary students will find themselves preaching the gospel a world way on the mission field. How should evangelical theology inform our understanding of the Great Commission task?

Henry: I cannot improve on the apostle Paul. His theology was a missions-minded theology. I would recommend that young missionaries and young theologians imagine what it would have been like to spend just one day with the apostle Paul.

Moore: I cannot help but wonder as I look at my students at Southern Seminary, if, sitting among them, is the next great evangelical theologian- the next Carl Henry. If that is the case, what advice would you have for this young student?

Henry: I am very worried about the loss of the priority of the mind among evangelicals. This is a matter of great importance in the struggle for evangelical fidelity. It must not be forgotten. I would recommend that an upcoming evangelical theologian take a good course in logic, and spend some extensive practice putting it to work.