

Evangelical metamorphoses

by [John G. Stackhouse Jr.](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

*The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, by Gary Dorrien

Who cares about evangelical theology? The American Academy of Religion rarely features it, though its membership includes a substantial number of evangelical theologians. Mainstream theological journals include it only occasionally. Indeed, given the stereotype of evangelicals as anti-intellectual and dogmatic, one might wonder whether there is such a thing as "evangelical theology."

Gary Dorrien, professor of religious studies and dean of the chapel at Kalamazoo College, is not an evangelical. He describes himself as "an Anglican social gospeler and dialectical theologian." But his new book takes evangelical theology seriously as an intellectual tradition, and treats it with admirable erudition and generosity of spirit, if not with full seriousness.

Dorrien devotes his book to tracing changes in methodology—a subject that has preoccupied much of nonevangelical and especially academic theology for some years now. Evangelical theology, however—as Dorrien himself observes—has instead been devoted largely to "the business of making biblical affirmations," that is, to questions of "theological substance" versus theological method. Leon Morris, John Stott and Alister McGrath have written on the cross of Christ; Stott, Ronald Sider, Michael Green and Charles Kraft have explored the nature of Christian mission; Carl F. H. Henry, Clark Pinnock and Donald Bloesch have written about the nature of God. Dorrien does not consider any of this work in detail.

What Dorrien does do, however, he does remarkably well. He sets the stage with a brief tour of protoevangelical and evangelical theologians from the 16th to the 19th centuries and includes theological traditions, such as dispensationalism, usually ignored in surveys of modern theology. Unhappily, Dorrien gives the standard, rationalistic account of Princeton Theology and fails to appreciate its testimony (especially in Charles Hodge) to the Holy Spirit's work through the word. He also ignores Jonathan Edwards.

Dorrien's main interest is American evangelicalism in the 20th century. He starts with J. Gresham Machen and early fundamentalism, and then fully undertakes his story with the founding of Fuller Theological Seminary in the 1940s and the rise of "neoevangelicalism," especially through Edward John Carnell and Carl F. H. Henry. Dorrien sketches with impressive sensitivity and patience the concerns of these evangelicals who, as one of their own has said, "needed prestige desperately."

Dorrien concludes that, for all their learning, insight and industry, Henry and Carnell were hopelessly enmeshed in categories and commitments inherited from their fundamentalist forebears. They tried to articulate a sophisticated understanding of biblical inerrancy and authority, and strove to defend it against various intellectual challenges of the day. In this campaign they were later joined by the young Clark Pinnock, among others. But they failed in their efforts.

Bernard Ramm was the first to tell American evangelicals that the program of Karl Barth held the most promise for emancipating evangelicals from hopelessly defending biblical inerrancy and from rationalistically following a biblicistic faith. Dorrien traces this conflict down another generation to our own day, seeing David Wells, J. I. Packer and other worthies of the evangelical theological right arrayed against "progressive evangelicals" such as Stanley Grenz, William Dyrness and the older Clark Pinnock. The latter follow Barth in distinguishing the text of the Bible from the actual word of God as it comes, through that text, from the Holy Spirit to faithful listeners.

Dorrien rightly refuses, however, to divide all contemporary evangelical theology into two camps. He notes Donald Bloesch and Alister McGrath as important representatives of those who grant something to the current critique of traditional evangelical theological method while resisting the blandishments of postliberalism. Pinnock heads up a small movement of evangelicals who are exploring process-type categories as they consider the "openness of God." Pinnock also stands among the larger wave of Arminian, holiness and Pentecostal theologians-most notably William Abraham-who are challenging the hegemony of Reformed theology in evangelicalism.

Dorrien comments on the attempts of Robert Webber, Thomas Oden and others to rehabilitate evangelicalism by referring to the catholic resources of Christianity's first millennium. And he remarks on the presence of liberationist and postmodernist themes in the striking work of Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, and on the

absence of feminist themes in any substantial evangelical theology. His portrait of the central and protracted debate in evangelical theology is helpful. And he rightly connects it to crucial theological and epistemological issues facing nonevangelical Christians as well.

What does it mean to tell the Christian story nowadays? What does it mean to affirm orthodox convictions about creation, incarnation, atonement, resurrection and eschatology in the face of postmodern doubt and in the presence of so many neighbors of such different convictions? Dorrien ends his story with a dialogue between evangelicals and postliberals on this question, but without resolution.

Evangelicalism is a network and tradition of Christians united on a few select convictions. As such, evangelicalism is not essentially committed to this or that theological method so long as Christ is glorified, the Bible obeyed, the gospel preached and the kingdom extended. Dorrien is quite right that a postfundamentalist, Reformed and apologetic outlook has dominated recent evangelical theology and that this domination has ended. He is also right to surmise that evangelical theology can, and indeed will, metamorphose to meet the needs of a new generation.