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After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology

by Bernard Ramm

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The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Ramm affirms a dozen times, dealt Christianity a nearly fatal blow. No sign of a recovering became visible until Karl Barth showed how destructive criticism could be accepted, yet true religion could be salvaged. Ramm confesses embarrassment and admits inability to define evangelical theology (pp. 1, 2) but judges that, during the Liberal-Orthodox debate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “the controversial doctrines have been given more importance than they deserve” (p.1). The controversial doctrines, as the reviewer remembers them in the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (1910, 1923), were the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the miracles of Christ, His Atonement, and His Resurrection. These are also the five points attacked by the Auburn Affirmation of 1924. Were they given far more importance than they deserved? Ramm himself, since he is not a Presbyterian, may be excused for not mentioning these particular five doctrines, but he seems to have in mind the doctrines of “the Trinity, the vicarious Atonement, the deity of Christ, the bodily resurrection” (p.7) and a few others. It may be the case, and no doubt is, that Ramm believes some of these doctrines; he merely holds that the deity of Christ has been given far more importance than it deserves.

The conclusion of chapter 1, though not the last sentence, is that “Evangelical theology must come to terms with the Enlightenment” (p. 10). He adds, “I present Barth’s theological methodology systematically as a viable option for the future of evangelical theology” (p. 12).

It is viable, apparently because Barth’s “statement on the authority of Scripture would satisfy the most orthodox theologian [cf. pp. 25, 30], and the cosmic visible return of Christ” (p. 14). This statement is patently false. Ramm (p. 148) practically admits that Warfield would not be satisfied with Barth’s view of Scripture. Nor would the thousand or so members of the Evangelical Theological Society. Every one of them has signed its statement that “The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written and therefore inerrant in the autographs.” Barth on the other hand wrote that “The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, ... were real historical men as we are, and ... actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word” (*Church Dogmatics*, 1, 2, pp. 528, 529).

Though Ramm here, and on several other pages, asserts that Barth believes in Christ’s bodily Resurrection, one can only conclude that he has misunderstood Barth. While in Washington in 1962, he was asked by Carl F.H. Henry, in the presence of several reporters, whether anything happened the first Easter morning which would have warranted a news item by these reporters. The reporters listened to Barth’s circumlocutory reply, and the United Press

religious editor then told Henry, “We got the message; it was No.” Barth often mentions the “resurrection,” but is there anywhere in his ponderous volumes an avowal that the tomb was empty?

Ramm classifies this reaction to Barth as “obscurantism” and “hypocrisy” (pp. 53, 124, et passim). The hypocrisy is the fact that “The fundamentalists must live in the modern technological world, which in turn is the gift of science. While denying the rights of modern science, fundamentalist abundantly use modern science in the propagation of their own views, as in modern computer technology.... They do not have a theology that enables them to live consistently in the modern world” (p. 53). Does this mean that if we use a typewriter, we are denying the Trinity?