

***Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry***

Gregory A. Thornbury

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Reviewed by: Stephen J. Wellum

In celebration of the centennial anniversary of Carl F. H. Henry's birth, Gregory Thornbury aims to recover the "classical evangelical" theological vision of Henry for evangelicals today. Thornbury wants to make Henry "cool again" (22) despite his waning influence in recent years. Thornbury, who recently became President of King's College after finishing serving at Union University as Professor of Philosophy and Dean of the School of Theology and Missions, is convinced that Henry's theological vision is what evangelicalism desperately needs today.

In chapter one, "The Lost World of Classic Evangelicalism," Thornbury describes the current state of evangelicalism in order to set the stage for why Henry's vision is so desperately needed. He defines evangelicalism as a "suicide death cult," (17) awash in self-image problems, defeatism, and theological confusion, a movement with little cultural impact. As part of our "suicidal" ways, we tend to "undermine or move away from the people who got evangelicals where they are today" (19), and this is particularly true of how some have departed from the theological vision of Henry and other classic evangelicals.

In briefly describing Henry's life, Thornbury reminds us how important Henry was for evangelical theology and evangelicalism. Born in New York City in 1913, Henry came of age at a time when the modernist-fundamentalist controversies were raging. After his dramatic conversion in 1933, he went on to earn degrees from Wheaton College and a Ph.D. from Boston University. In 1947, he published *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* which called fundamentalists away from their social apathy and lack of cultural engagement to stand firm for the truth of God's Word in the public square. Then from 1976 to 1983, Henry published his six volume work, *God, Revelation and Authority*, which laid the epistemological and theological grounds for a robust evangelical theology

rooted in Scripture as God's authoritative speech. His impact on evangelical institutions was massive. Henry was instrumental in the start of the National Association of Evangelicals. He participated in the formation of key evangelical institutions such as: *Christianity Today*, the Lausanne Conference, World Vision, Prison Fellowship, and Fuller Seminary, and he influenced numerous other evangelical institutions. Yet, as Thornbury notes, with the passing of time and the impact of postmodernism on evangelical theology, Henry's influence waned, and even by some, it was rejected.

Thornbury's goal is for Henry's work to serve as a "cipher to its future" (31). Through Henry, Thornbury calls evangelicals back to their "classic" heritage. He wants to promote the strengths of the past in order to affirm presently a robust theology consistent with historic Christian orthodoxy. He especially wants to provide the necessary epistemological grounding which has been eroded in our postmodern age. In order to accomplish this goal, Thornbury chooses to "reengage Henry as a theorist of classic evangelicalism" (33) through the lens of a few key texts: volumes 2 and 4 of *God, Revelation and Authority* and *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Thornbury is convinced that if these works are recovered, evangelicalism will move beyond its "suicidal" tendencies. Thornbury successfully re-introduces Henry's theological vision for evangelicals today in chapters 2-6 entitled: "Epistemology Matters," "Theology Matters," "Inerrancy Matters," "Culture Matters," and "Evangelicalism Matters." The book concludes with a selected bibliography of works by Henry.

What are the strengths of this work? There are many, but let me focus on two. First, Thornbury helpfully distills Henry's most important points and succinctly presents them in light of the current debate. In a short space, we are introduced to Henry's thought which is especially useful for those who are reading Henry for the first time. Henry is not an easy read, but Thornbury's accurate exposition is a valuable introduction to Henry's work.

Second, each chapter nicely captures what is especially important in the current discussion. Thornbury correctly laments that epistemological discussion is lacking in current theology and

especially its theological grounding (see 34-58), something which Henry repeatedly addressed. Henry, Thornbury notes, unashamedly espoused a “revelational epistemology” grounded in theology proper, which is just as important to emphasize today as it was then.

Additionally, Thornbury nicely describes how Henry stood against various postliberal tendencies to de-propositionalize truth. He rightly warns that we must affirm our conviction that God has spoken and as such, there is objective truth and an authoritative Scripture. In making this point, Thornbury rightly sounds the alarm against some forms of postconservatism which, in the end, are confused over the nature of truth thus leaving theology groundless (see 59-115). In “Inerrancy Matters,” Thornbury demonstrates why inerrancy was so important for Henry and why it must be important for us. He nicely applies this discussion to current debates over the historicity of Adam and various hermeneutical issues (see 116-158). Overall, Thornbury, through Henry, does a fine job of showing why evangelical theology must not forfeit her commitment to truth and the Triune God of truth.

Are there any weaknesses in this work? In my view the book’s strengths outweigh its weaknesses, but let me mention two. First, in his zeal to promote Henry’s theology over against current evangelical trends, and especially to respond to some of Henry’s critics, Thornbury does not differentiate between critics who are sympathetically building on Henry but seeking to improve him (thus these “critics” would basically agree with Henry’s theology, emphasis on epistemology, inerrancy, etc.) and those critics who oppose him due to their departure from his overall theology. For example, Thornbury lumps together Stanley Grenz and John Franke, who are definitely in the latter category, and Kevin Vanhoozer, who belongs in the former category. Even though Vanhoozer has criticized Henry, he sympathetically builds on him while maintaining a full commitment to inerrancy, a classic theology proper, and most of Henry’s theological concerns.

Second, and more significant, is Thornbury’s categorization of speech-act theory as an epistemology when it is not. He contends that since speech-act theory was developed by naturalists like John

Searle that it cannot be utilized in theology and that speech-act theory is antithetical to a correspondence theory of truth (21-22, 103-115). As applied to evangelical theology, Thornbury specifically critiques Vanhoozer's use of speech-act theory and seems to imply it will lead to a denial of propositional revelation, yet there is nothing in Vanhoozer or speech-act theory which substantiates this claim. In fact, Vanhoozer agrees wholeheartedly with Henry that "God spoke in intelligent sentences and paragraphs" (109). Vanhoozer's concern is to do justice to all the ways that God has spoken in human language but also to apply these truths to the actual doing of theology.

However, apart from these weaknesses, Thornbury's work is a must read for those who are concerned about the current state of evangelical theology. Its overwhelming strength is that it reminds us again of the ground-breaking work of Carl F. H. Henry. We all stand on the shoulders of those who have preceded us. Our generation of evangelicals is the worse if we fail to stand on the shoulders of Henry, and we ought to be thankful for Thornbury's work which enables us better to do so.

*Stephen J. Wellum*  
*Professor of Christian Theology*  
*The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*