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Reviewing *A Future for American Evangelicalism: Commitment, Openness, and Conversation*

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A Future for American Evangelicalism: Commitment, Openness, and Conversation. By Harold Heie. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015. 176 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-4982-0878-9 (HARDCOVER) \$40

Evangelicalism is engulfed with a diversity of understanding and practice that provides no end of controversy and conflict. In this milieu, Dr. Harold Heie sees a bifurcation of positions that perpetuates the issue: commitment and openness. The commitment side adheres to holding to a truth for which one would die, if necessary. The openness groups insist on inclusivity, recognizing the frailty and knowledge limitations of humans. By tackling this serious and complicated issue, Heie has thrust himself into the often bewildering world of American theology and spirituality with a courageous heart. Heie wishes to find a theological element, a “working center” that will “hold evangelicals together in the midst of great diversity in beliefs and ecclesiastical practices.” His solution is an identification of and participation in God’s Project of Reconciliation.

Though Heie is a mechanical and aerospace engineer by training and occupation, he identifies several major issues in evangelicalism that emerged from a conversation he hosted on his website involving 26 evangelical scholars. After such a rich contribution of understanding, Heie assembled the ideas presented and developed his thematic approach to a solution to our American theological dilemma. He believes that the “primary telltale sign of a vibrant American Evangelicalism in the future will be the practice of evangelicals creating welcoming spaces for respectful conversation with those who disagree with them.” Evangelicals should be able to “express their beliefs with deep conviction and, at the same time, show that they are open to listening to the contrary views of others and respectfully talking about their disagreements with the goal of gaining a better mutual understanding of Truth.”

In the first of the identified major issues, “Evangelicalism and the Modern Study of Scripture” (chapter four), Dr. Heie considers the issues to be focused on historical criticism, which tends to diminish the roles of the miraculous and the spiritual, in favor of human sociology. His conclusion to the matter counsels evangelicals to recognize the effects of

culture on our interpretations and understanding of Scripture, which suggests that Christians who see universal Biblical principles in a more literal sense may be contributing to the theological conflict. Clearly, culture does affect human hermeneutic and understanding of the Bible, and recognizing that influence helps greatly to get the Scriptural messages better, but there must be as well a recognition that (1) the Bible is a revelation of the nature of God, not a manual of operation nor a comprehensive history, and (2) there are universal principles that pertain to all people irrespective of culture, history, language, and traditions.

In “Evangelicalism and Morality” (chapter five), Heie attempts to focus on the practices of Christians rather than the theological aspects of ethics. All Christians, he suggests, should be willing to be kind to strangers, help each other in times of need, and not be concerned about the theological positions of people with whom we interact. Morality apparently only involves the actions of compassion toward other humans, not the identification of immoral behavior. Christian ethics must consider the biblical principles as guides for personal and social behavior. We can be kind and helpful to criminals, homosexuals, rapists, abortionists, and others whose behavior is destructive but we can never condone or approve of the moral position these people have taken, as they oppose biblical directives and principles. Generally Evangelicals stand on the side of the biblical condemnation which, in many non-evangelical eyes, creates an irreconcilable conflict.

Where there are people and human organizations there will always be politics. Many people wish to eliminate political considerations in life so there would not be emotional battles over the way “things are done.” In chapter 6, “Evangelicalism and Politics,” Heie sides with engaging those who disagree with us by patient listening and humility, seriously considering their views and desires. The Christian attitude should indeed be reflective of the fruit of the Spirit, but consideration must also be given to the consequences of allowing contrary political actions to dictate the political philosophy of society. Non-Christians do not honor Biblical values, and political activists who oppose Christian principles do not patiently listen and seriously consider evangelical social values. Power to control is the essence of politics, even in the Church. Power is not necessarily a negative factor. In America, someone or some group will have the

power to establish social practices, and evangelicals are willing to engage contrary social and political positions in order to ensure that Christian values are not abandoned in the behaviors of American society. Talk is one thing; the force of law another.

Again, Dr. Heie make some assumptions in his next section, “Evangelicals and Scientific Models of Humanity and Cosmic and Human Origins” (chapter seven), that evangelicals oppose science, which they most certainly do not. He does recognize that science is not Neo-Darwinian Evolutionism, materialism, scientism, and atheism. The problem has been the ascendancy of those philosophies into positions of recognition as “science” and the prominence of supporters of those views in media and education, which alarm evangelicals and cause mistrust in the intentions of advocates of those views. Evangelicals believe that either God created the world or He did not. A godless, purposeless universe makes all human value irrelevant. True “science,” which is the discovery and explanation of how the physical universe works should, as Heie says, be able to work with a religious paradigm. The major problem with dialogue in these two realms is the definition of terms. Neo-Darwinism, by definition, is godless, and thus cannot be compatible with Christianity. There is no Hegelian dialectic that can work in this case.

In the last issue of contention, “Evangelicals and Higher Education” (chapter eight), Heie seems to see Christian institutions of higher education as restrictive of the “Quest for Truth,” more determined to force adherence to certain traditional beliefs rather than allow for diversion. As that may be the case, the definition of “Quest for Truth” could stand some understanding. Many American liberal perspectives call for “change” as if that is the goal of greatest good for all societies. Not everything needs to be changed. There are some traditional Christian principles that must remain if American society will continue to be free and moral. Besides, the major obstacle to knowledge of Truth and wisdom has been secular higher education. Too many children of evangelicals have come back from college having abandoned Christianity because of the influence of non-Christian professors. Education is not valueless. The attack against Christian ideas and values is massive and relentless in American secular higher education, which does nothing to accommodate a patient listening and honest consideration of all views.

Finally, Dr. Heie advocates for Christian efforts to focus on reconciling all people to God as the center of evangelical action. Christians can be open to understanding the views of others and discuss differences as long as “others” have the same approach. We can appreciate difference (a hard thing for Americans to do about anything; just ask football fans) and respect the humanity of all people. After all, we are here to be reconcilers, ambassadors of God, ones who have seen the way out of our bondage to sin and have adopted the roles of healers. Heie primarily seeks to reconcile evangelicals to themselves, which indeed should be done. The Church is one, whether we admit it or not, and all our divisions are meaningless in the light of the world to come. We need not fight, but rather present our views. We need not discard the traditions and practices of other evangelical churches but appreciate the ways other evangelicals worship and serve God. We need not give up on the society and the “mistakes” of other evangelicals but work together to spread the Gospel and help strengthen the mission and ministry of all churches. Heie has pointed out American evangelical selfishness and narcissism, which evidently needs correction.

REFERENCES

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