

## **Carl Henry: Theologian for All Seasons (2)**

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## **Carl Henry: An Introduction**

While in seminary in the 1960s, I read Carl Henry's editorials in *Christianity Today* and his columns on modern theology. His keen analyses helped me greatly, since my professors were almost all theological liberals.

In 1980, while I was teaching Greek at China Evangelical Seminary in Taipei, Henry came to the seminary and gave a lecture on his *magnum opus*, *God, Revelation and Authority*. The first four volumes were being translated into Chinese and published by the seminary press. We invited him to our home for dinner and found him to be a very gracious and humble man.

After reading parts of Volume I, I realized that this book was difficult, even for me, and would probably be even harder for Chinese readers. The publisher suggested that I make an abridgment of the Chinese translation. Dr. Henry kindly gave permission to make an abridgment, which I did. In the Chinese abridgment, I added paragraph and section headings to show the flow of the argument, and study questions at the end of each chapter.

When it became clear that the last two volumes of the set would not be translated into Chinese, he later gave permission to translate only my abridgment of the last two volumes. Furthermore, he gave \$10,000 to pay for translation and publication of the abridgment.

The translation of the last two volumes is completed, and the entire 6-volume set is to be published in early 2022.

We talked on the phone before he died. I thanked him for all the work he had done for the rest of us.

"I couldn't do it now," he replied in a weak voice.

"Well, you did it then," I said, "and we are all grateful."

### **WHY Carl Henry?**

Carl Henry died in 2003. Almost all his work was published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Why should we be reading him now? Let me offer a few reasons.

### **His Credentials/Qualifications**

Carl Henry earned a B.A. from Wheaton College with a major in philosophy (1938), an M.A. in theology from Wheaton, an M.A. in biblical languages from another graduate school (1940), a B.D. (M.Div.) and then a ThD from Northern Baptist Seminary (1942), and a PhD in philosophy Boston University (1949).

In addition to Greek and Hebrew, he studied Latin, French, and German.

After earning his doctoral degree in theology, he did further studies on Roman Catholic theology at three Roman Catholic universities. In later years, he sat in on lectures by renowned theologians at the University of Edinburgh and Cambridge University.

From his many books you can easily see that Carl Henry possessed an immense knowledge of Western philosophy and theology, including German theology. Part of the reason was that his wife Helga was fluent in German and kept him up to date.

Beginning in the 1960s, his worldwide travels gave him opportunities to have conversations with theologians and pastors of every background.

A trained journalist, he wrote beautiful, powerful English. In fact, I don't know of any other English prose writer who can compare with Henry. His style is much more concise than Barth, but it is still complex and profound. Many readers find his long sentences hard to handle, but I think that they enable him to express his ideas with clarity and precision.

### **His Influence**

Henry also deserves our study because he was one of the founders of the modern evangelical movement, along with Billy Graham and Harold Ockenga. He helped to found Fuller Seminary, the National Association of Evangelicals, and the Evangelical Theological Society. He was the only person to be chosen as president of both the Evangelical Theological Society (1967-70) and the more liberal American Theological Association (1979-80).

These “neo-evangelicals,” as some called them, broke with fundamentalism in several ways. They urged evangelical engagement with culture, including philosophy, education, the arts, and even politics. He especially urged evangelicals to promote justice in society. Historian John Woodbridge once said, “Dr. Henry was the ‘Great Recoverer’ of social justice and the gospel and the relationship between them.”

He was the founding editor of *Christianity Today* in 1955 (until 1965), which became the voice of thoughtful evangelicals and a counterpart to the liberal *Christian Century*.

Evangelicals are committed to evangelism, of course, and Henry's leadership was demonstrated as well by his organizing role in the Berlin Conferences on Evangelism (1966). *Time Magazine* called him the “Dean of Evangelical Theologians” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, because he was acknowledged as the leading thinker and writer among those who held to the authority of Scripture.

He served as professor of theology at various seminaries (Northern Baptist; Fuller; Eastern Baptist Seminary (1969-74); and visiting professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (1971)). Over the years, he impacted thousands of students. Especially after 1974, he lectured at countless seminaries and universities around the world.

He preached in countless churches. His preaching combined the beauty of his rhetoric, profound exegesis of Scripture, and a heart that loved God and everyone struggling with life's issues.

He participated or initiated countless collaborative efforts, such as edited volumes, e.g., *Evangelical Affirmations* (1990).

His publications have been translated into several languages, including *God, Revelation and Authority*, his *magnum opus* (English and Chinese editions).

One of the reasons that this big work is not read today is that Henry interacted with so many scholars whose works were influential in his time. You get tired of reading about what some unfamiliar writer said. On the other hand, Henry did offer valuable critiques of major theologians and philosophers. In particular, his comments on Barth were both positive and critical, and provide an antidote to both wholesale rejection of Barth and the growing evangelical endorsement of Barth's dialectical theology.

### **His Character**

Those who knew Dr. Henry well said that, despite his prominence, he remained humble. Toward the end of his life he was asked, “Many men who have attained to your level of fame and influence become proud, but you have not. Why? He responded, ‘How can anyone be proud when standing at the foot of the Cross?’”

Throughout his life, he maintained a zeal for evangelism. For years, he preached at the Rose Bowl Easter Sunday service, and he always sought opportunities to share the gospel with people on his travels.

When you first met him, you could tell that he was filled with love. He especially loved his wife and remained faithful to her all his life.

Henry was known for his kindness and fairness in critiquing others and when responding to criticism.

### **WHAT Did Carl Henry Write?**

The following brief survey will show the depth and breadth of Carl Henry's thought, and thus his relevance for us today.

Here, then, is a list of most of his major works:

### **Ethics and Theology**

- *Uneasy Conscience of American Fundamentalism*, 1947
- *Christian Personal Ethics*, 1957
- *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, 1964
- *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration*, 1971
- *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, 1973
- *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 1978
- *Christian Countermoves In A Decadent Culture*, 1986
- *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 1988

### **Christianity and Philosophy**

- *Remaking the Modern Mind*, 1948
- *The Drift of Western Thought*, 1951
- (*Also, God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 volumes, 1976-1983)

### **Systematic Theology**

- *God, Revelation and Authority*, 6 volumes, 1976-1983
- *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief: The Rutherford Lectures*, 1990. This short book brilliantly and concisely describes how Western thought, including much Christian theology, has descended into relativism.

### **Autobiography**

- *Confessions of a Theologian*, 1986

### ***God, Revelation and Authority***

This is a great work of systematic theology, though some critics have said that it is not.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will simply list or mention many of the most important topics treated, to show that, though he does focus on the doctrines of the Knowledge of God (epistemology) and of God (Theology proper), *GRA* does, in fact, treat almost all the themes usually covered in books on systematic theology.

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1. Contra Timothy George, "Foreward." In *Essential Evangelicalism*. Edited by Matthew J. Hall & Owen Strachan. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015, 11.

## Volumes 1-4

### Volume 1 Prolegomena

Some highlights:

Chapter 1      There is a crisis of truth and the Word: We face a choice between the Bible or mass media; we would today add social media as a major rival to Scripture. We can also say that the contest is between absolute truth vs. relativism. Henry also warned of the advance of neo-paganism. He was prophetic, for our society is now almost thoroughly pagan.

Chapter 2      Traces the history of Western philosophy in brief, down to the present.

Chapter 3      “Revelation and Myth” responds to the common use of the category of “myth” to describe portions of the Bible that are offensive to some modern thinkers.

Chapter 4      Shows that there are four ways of knowing spiritual or ultimate truth:

1. *Intuition*: But we must distinguish between mysticism and rational intuition: Augustine, Calvin, and Henry.
2. *Experience*, or empiricism, including personal emotional experience and science; in philosophy, this led to logical positivism.
3. *Reason*: Philosophical rationalism ways that we can figure out ultimate truth; but Christians believe that we are affected by sin and so can't reason ourselves to truth; Christians, however, use reason to understand God's revelation.
4. *Revelation*: From God in Scripture

*Other Chapters contain:*

- Critiques of logical positivism; naturalism; reliance on science; theology and philosophy; the method and criteria of theology; Kant
- His view: theological transcendent *a priori*
- His fundamental assumption: The existence of a living and self-revealing God
- Scripture as the God-breathed revelation of God in the words chosen by the Holy Spirit as he guided the hands of the writers
- Treatment of supposed errors and contradictions of Scripture

- He responds to, and shows the errors of, negative biblical criticism

## **Volume 2**

Henry begins an exposition of fifteen theses about revelation, which occupy volumes 2-4.

*Fifteen theses: The doctrine of revelation is the critical controversy in modern theology*

*One:*

Revelation is a divinely initiated activity. We only know what God has chosen to reveal to us.

*Two:*

Revelation is for our benefit, that we might have communion with God.

*Three:*

Divine revelation does not completely disclose God to us. He transcends his revelation. We know only in part.

*Four:*

This revelation “in part,” is nevertheless “reliable and consistent.” It is unified, not contradictory.

*Five:*

God reveals himself in a variety of ways: nature, the image of God in man, Scripture.

*Six:*

Divine revelation is personal. Here he examines the names of God in Scripture.

*Seven:*

Historical revelation: God reveals himself in history, as interpreted by Scripture. This is one of Henry’s major contributions.

## **Volume 3**

*Eight:*

God’s personal incarnation in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ view of Scripture. He is the only Mediator. He is the God-Man. He rose from the dead.

*Nine:*

The Mediating Logos: Henry believes in the intelligibility of the Logos of God. The relationship between the Logos and human logic. In brief, human logic reflects our creation in the image of God, who is the Logos. Logic of religious language.

*Ten:*

Revelation as Rational-Verbal Communication. Cognitive aspects of revelation. Origin of language. A theistic view of language. The living God who speaks. The Bible as propositional revelation.

- For example: “God is Love.” “God is Light.” “The Word was God.” “The Word became flesh,” and countless others, including the Old Testament narratives and the first five books of the New Testament.
- Not all sentences in the Bible are propositions, but most of them are, and the rest can be converted into propositions. Doctrinal belief and the Word of God.

#### **Volume 4**

*Eleven:*

The Bible as the authoritative norm for Christian theology. The modern revolt against authority. Is the Bible literally true? Yes, although we acknowledge figurative elements in it.

*Twelve:*

The Spirit as communicator and interpreter:

- The meaning of inspiration. Inerrancy of Scripture. Infallibility of the copies. Shows that belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture is reasonable.
- The Spirit as “author” of Scripture. The Spirit as interpreter of Scripture. Principles of hermeneutics. Problem passages. Historical criticism. The Canon. The unity of Scripture. The Spirit and church proclamation.

*Thirteen:*

The Spirit, the bestower of new life. Redeemed humanity as the image of God. Christians and society.

*Fourteen:*

The Church as the new society. Good news for the oppressed. Marxist interpretation of the Bible and Marxism.

*Fifteen:*

God and the End of all ends. Eschatology.

Volumes 5 & 6 deal with theology proper, or the doctrine of God.

## **Volume 5**

- God's reality and existence
- God's attributes
- The Trinity - This is the most succinct, clear, and powerful exposition of what the Bible says about the Trinity, and how the early church came to formulate this doctrine in the Nicen Creed, that I have read.
- Knowability of God: This is another major theme of Henry's.
  - Knowability of God. He is incomprehensible, in that we can never know him completely or exhaustively. He is beyond us.
  - But we can know him truly: He is knowable.
  - (The whole Bible assumes this. e.g., John 17:3; Ephesians 1:17-23; and all the statements about God: God is love; God is light; John 3:16; Genesis 1:1.)
  - We know him practically through the world that is seen, but accurately and more fully in Scripture.

## **Volume 6**

“The God Who Stands and Stays”

Henry continues his exposition of the doctrine of God.

- God is both transcendent and immanent.

He analyzes and critiques Process philosophy.

Election: the freedom of God.

God the sovereign Creator.

- Creation from nothing; six days; origin and nature of man.
- Angels, Satan, demons, and the fall

Scripture and science: Henry had criticized fundamentalists for ignoring the relationship between Christian faith and science. He studied the philosophy of science.

- In these chapters, he explains how the philosophy of science is in disarray.
- He points to the constant revision of scientific theories and even of “facts.”
- Taking up the question of evolution, Henry describes what he calls “The crisis of evolutionary theory.” In two chapters, Henry relies on quotations from evolutionary scientists to expose the internal contradictions of the theory.

Next, he discusses the goodness of God and the problem of evil, as well as the doctrine of Providence. Here Henry states that God is sovereign. And he is good.

- We don’t know where evil came from, nor do we understand it.
- We do know that the presence of evil in the world is everywhere assumed in the Bible, which graphically describes the manifestations of evil, both satanic and human, throughout its pages.
- Thus, the presence of evil is no surprise to Christians, nor does it “prove” that God does not exist or that he is not both good and omnipotent.
- Jesus absorbed God’s wrath for sin upon himself; God raised him from the dead. We thus know that God is both good and all-powerful, and that he fully opposes evil.
- Someday, God will fully triumph over evil.
- Unlike Barth, Henry does not try to explain evil or its origin and nature.
- He goes up to the limit of what the Bible says, and then stops, admitting his ignorance.

In three chapters, Henry expounds what the Scripture says about God’s goodness toward us.

- The Fatherhood of God
- The Holiness of God
- God’s love

Fully aware of the challenge of other belief systems, he includes a chapter called, “Finding Christ in Other Religions?”

Another chapter on the ministry of the Holy Spirit fills out what he had written earlier on the role of the Spirit in revelation.

Henry was always deeply concerned to affirm that God is ruling over his creation. In three chapters he discusses:

- The God of justice and the kingdom of God
- The Christian and political duty
- Divine providence

The last chapter, which is very eloquent, deals with “The finalities: the last things.”

### ***Carl Henry: Theologian for All Seasons***

Appearing in both English and Chinese editions, this book by me serves as an introduction to Carl Henry and to *God, Revelation and Authority*.

Chapter 1     Henry’s life and character

Chapter 2     His recent neglect among Evangelicals

Chapter 3     His relationship to 20th century theologians

- I give a quick summary of 20th century theology.
- I try to show the biblical nature of his theology.
- It is not speculative.
- He is in constant interaction with Barth and other theologians.

Chapter 4     His theology is “Reformed,” but not covenantal; he is a Baptist.

Chapter 5     Doctrine of revelation: his key contribution

- The doctrine of revelation is the part of his theology that is most criticized and least understood.
- He begins with the Logos, the mind of God as revealed in Christ and through the Scriptures.
- God has created us in his own image; this consists largely in our mind and mental capacities, including communication and relationships.
- The laws of logic are the way God thinks.
- Reason can be used to understand God’s Word and world, but not to generate truth. Faith in his revelation comes first.

- Chapter 6 I discuss varieties of apologetics and show that Henry mostly uses Presuppositional apologetics.
- His apologetics meets the needs of the 21st century.
- Chapter 7 Prophet for 21st century
- As a journalist, Henry understood mass media and offers an incisive critique of it.
  - He also deals with Science.
  - Postmodern attacks on “rationality.”
  - He shows why we should not accept the conclusions of negative criticism.
  - He shows why we should continue to affirm the inerrancy of Scripture.
  - He discusses feminism and homosexuality.
  - He exposes the “empty core” of evangelicalism.
  - He explains the reasons for the intellectual, social, political, moral, and religious collapse of the West.
  - On this subject I highly recommend *The Twilight of a Great Civilization*.
- Chapters 8-10 Response to criticisms
- Henry is not modern enough. But:
  - He confronts modern negative biblical criticism and shows its many fallacies and failures.
  - He engages in sound biblical exegesis.
  - He engages with modern philosophy and theology.
  - He engages modern science.
  - He’s been accused of narrow mindedness, but unlike the fundamentalists, he interacts with modern theologians of all sorts and affirms what he thinks is biblical in them.
- Chapter 8 Rationalism?
- He is charged with being “Too ‘Modern’”  
I deal with this in a paper, “Was Carl Henry a Rationalist?” (99+) (DOC) [Was Carl Henry A Rationalist | Wright Doyle - Academia.edu](#), as well as in my book.
  - To put it simply: As we have seen earlier in the rapid survey of *God, Revelation and Authority*, he denounced rationalism constantly.
  - That is, he did not give reason a primary role in the discovery of truth about God.
  - He started with faith in God and in his revelation in Scripture.
  - He only used reason to understand God’s revelation.

- He did believe that the image of God remains in fallen man, to the degree that the human mind retains the ability to evaluate evidence and weigh the value of different arguments.
- Thus, an unbeliever can understand what the Bible is saying.
- On the other hand, he insisted that only the Holy Spirit can enlighten our minds and open our hearts to receive, believe, and act upon God's revelation.

## **Conclusion**

I hope that you can now see why I believe that Chinese theologians, philosophers, students of history, and thinkers of all sorts would benefit from studying Carl Henry.

## Was Carl Henry A Rationalist?

Perhaps the most commonly-voiced criticism against Henry is that of being a **rationalist**, and therefore a prisoner of the now-defunct modern project. Bob Patterson, for example, writes that: “Not all evangelicals are happy with Henry’s bent toward rationalism.”<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson note that his “critics have also found him to be overly concerned with reason and propositional revelation.”<sup>3</sup> Donald Bloesch says, “The method of Gordon Clark and Carl Henry is deductive, deriving conclusions from given rational principles.”<sup>4</sup> Still, the accusations of rationalism reflected in Patterson’s largely sympathetic treatment of Henry pale in comparison to the words of Harvey Conn’s repetition and affirmation of Van Til’s description of the approaches of “Neo-evangelicals”:

These men . . . accept . . . an emphasis on “the law of non-contradiction” (Carnell) or “logic as an exercise of the reason to test for truth” (Gordon Clark) or what Van Til designates as “Greek theism” (Carl Henry) as one of their operating categories or presuppositions. And precisely here lies the basic weakness of this sort of apologetics. “It is the attempt to join higher forms of non-Christian thought in their opposition to lower forms of non-Christian thought . . .”<sup>5</sup>

In the same vein, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest call Henry and his mentor Gordon Clark deductive rationalists.

### What is “Rationalism”?

Rationalism has been defined as a “conviction that reason provides the best or even the only path to truth. . . . In theology the term rationalism often designates a position that subordinates revelation to human reason or rules out revelation as a source of knowledge altogether.”<sup>6</sup>

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2. Bob Patterson, *Carl F.H. Henry*, 164 ff. Note: At least one person has charged Henry with being a Thomist. Albert Mohler records that Thomas Reginald McNeal described Henry’s “method as apologetic presuppositionalism” which is “a rationalistic theological methodology dominated by the priority of reason over faith.” (“A Critical Analysis of the Doctrine of God in the Theology of Carl F. H. Henry,” Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986) Mohler replies, “Yet Henry has always stressed that revelation is *prior* to both reason and faith, even as he has championed the role of reason and rationality in human thought. . . . Henry may be *rationalistic*, if by this we indicate his reliance upon reason as an instrument of understanding; but he is not a *rationalist*, if by this he is thought to place reason prior to revelation.” Note, 399. The characterization of Henry as a Thomist borders on the bizarre, given Henry’s explicit repudiation of Aquinas’ theological method at many points. See, for example, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1.4, “The Ways of Knowing.”

3. Stanley Grenz & Roger Olson, *20th Century Theology*, 297.

4. Patterson, 166, quoting Bloesch, *Essentials*, 267-8 .

5. Harvey Conn, *Contemporary World Theology*, 139-140, citing Van Til, *The New Evangelicalism*, 62.

6. C.S. Evans, “Approaches to Christian Apologetics,” 98-99.

M.J. Ovey reminds us that “rationalism” carries negative overtones in several communities, and provides a helpful discussion of some of the term’s meanings.<sup>7</sup> “Rationalism” receives criticism from Christians if it means “the supremacy and adequacy of human reason” to discover truth. “Romantic” critics claim that rationalism rules out love and exhibits “sterility and inability to explain the richness of human experience.”<sup>8</sup> Post-moderns reject rationalism for the latter reason, as well as from their reaction to any assertion of ultimate, absolute truths, and the assumption that reason can decipher and describe the multiple mysteries of life. In Christian apologetics, “rationalism” may describe the conviction that “if proper evidence is produced in favor of Christian faith a listener will, as a rational being, inevitably come to faith” or that “rational” evidence for the truth claims of the Bible are sufficient to persuade an honest seeker.<sup>9</sup> As Ovey rightly points out, “The current climate of postmodernism is unfavourable to rationalism in many of the above senses.” Post-moderns reject the idea of any universal truth (except their own assertion of universal relativism!) and suspect that “reason” is only a weapon in the hands of those with an agenda. “For this reason the charge that Christian belief is ‘rationalist’ can be devastating in a postmodern context.”<sup>10</sup> When Henry’s opponents brand his theological method as “rationalistic,” therefore, they score a rhetorical victory without really having to substantiate their charge.

### **Response to Criticisms of Rationalism**

In the rest of this paper, I shall try to show that Carl Henry’s thought does not fit in any sense the standard definitions of “rationalism” given above. That is, he does not believe that reason alone can ascertain ultimate truth, he does not give reason priority over God’s revelation in the Bible, and he does not believe that rational evidence alone will persuade anyone to believe in Christ. At the outset, let us note that Carl Henry himself repeatedly and unequivocally renounced and repudiated rationalism. Early in Volume One, for example, he highlights the reliance of all reasoning upon assumptions and presuppositions. A chapter on “Theology and Philosophy” in the same volume explains why the evangelical theologian cannot accept the anti-metaphysical bias of much modern philosophy:

The speculative approach ignores the self-revelation of the living God and it propounds a rationalistic world view and life view on antithetical premises. In so doing it minimizes man’s finiteness and conceals his epistemic predicament in sin.<sup>11</sup>

Such explicit rejection of rationalism puts the burden of proof upon those who would deny that Carl Henry understood his own theological method. To label Carl Henry a “rationalist” because he does not disavow the use of reason is akin to calling Karl Marx a capitalist because of

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7. M.J. Ovey, “Rationalism,” 592–4. The quotations following come from this article.

8. Ovey, “Rationalism,” 593.

9. Ovey, 594.

10. Ovey, 594.

11. Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1.195.

the title of his book; one has to amass considerable evidence to support such an allegation. The criticisms quoted above state that Henry's supposed "rationalism" is marked by being "overly concerned with reason and propositional revelation." We shall look in more detail at some possible meanings of "being overly concerned with reason," for now perhaps we might ask, What does "overly concerned" imply?

- More concerned with human reason than with divine revelation? The first four volumes of *God, Revelation and Authority* constitute a mammoth attempt to assert the nature, means, and priority of divine revelation, particularly written revelation in the Bible.
- More concerned with reason than with emotions? Yes, if you mean emotions as a vehicle for revelation. Henry is not a Romantic. On the other hand, throughout his writings he affirms his belief in what Jonathan Edwards would call "religious affections" as essential to a normal Christian life, and in his autobiography refers several times to his own emotional responses to God's goodness and greatness.<sup>12</sup>
- More than intuition? If by intuition we mean ineffable mystical intuitions, Henry counters that "mystical intuitionism is implicitly pantheistic. It obscures both the transcendence of the Creator-God and man's moral waywardness. . . . While there is a mystery side to God, revelation is mystery dispelled and conveys information about God and his purposes."<sup>13</sup>

Still, there is a kind of "rational intuitionism" held by Augustine, Calvin, and others, including Henry, which believes that "human beings know certain propositions are immediately to be true, without resort to inference."<sup>14</sup> These would include the existence of God and the sense of right and wrong, the awareness of self, the laws of logic, and the truths of mathematics. "According to this view, the categories of thought are aptitudes for thought implanted by the Creator and synchronized with the whole of created reality."<sup>15</sup> What about reason as distinct from experience? Henry points out that Thomistic theology builds upon sense impressions as a foundation, and that this made it vulnerable to later secular philosophical attack. He describes the weakness of modern empiricism, especially scientific empiricism and logical positivism, and asserts that it can never lead to anything but tentative conclusions. Divine revelation alone can provide certitude.

What, then, is the role of reason? Very early in *God, Revelation and Authority*, Henry lays bare the assumptions of what he calls "the rationalistic method of knowing" that "considers human reasoning as the only reliable and valid source of knowledge."<sup>16</sup> After tracing the course

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12. "My deepest memories are those spent waiting before God, often praying for others, . . . sometimes waiting before him in tears, sometimes in joy, sometimes wrestling alternatives, sometimes just worshipping him in adoration. Heaven will be an unending feast for the soul that basks in his presence." Henry, *Confessions*, 407.

13. Henry, *GRA*, 1.73.

14. Henry, 1.73.

15. Henry, 1.77.

16. Henry, 1.85.

and fortunes of rationalism in Western philosophy, Henry declares that faith in the role of human reason has been shattered in recent years, thus acknowledging trends which later came to be called “postmodernism.” From a Christian standpoint, “Human reason is not a source of infallible truth about ultimate reality,” because man is both finite and fallen.<sup>17</sup> There is no way that any created person could know all that is necessary for “a comprehensive world-life view,” and the “sinful human spirit slants its own perspectives in a manner that does violence to the truth of revelation, while its very formulations are at the same time made possible because reason is a divine gift whose legitimate and proper use man has compromised.”<sup>18</sup>

That last clause points to the other side of Henry’s view of reason: its “legitimate and proper use.” Throughout *God, Revelation and Authority*, he strenuously opposes the view that “reason must in principle be anti-revelational. . . . A deity related to man only in terms of contradiction and paradox can serve neither the cause of revelation, reason or experience.”<sup>19</sup> He espouses, therefore, an “evangelical rational theism.”<sup>20</sup> That is, a theism based on God’s revelation, and not warped by irrational, self-contradictory assertions. Its fundamental assumption – derived from the Bible – is that “the Logos of God is the coordinating reality that holds together thought, life and experience.”<sup>21</sup> “Its basic premise is that the living God should be allowed to speak for himself and to define the abiding role of reason and the meaning of revelation. . . . The rationalistic approach subordinates the truth of revelation to its own alternatives and has speculated itself into exhaustion.” Our choice now is between “human postulation or divine revelation.”<sup>22</sup>

To continue with the criticisms quoted above, **he is faulted for following a fundamentally deductive method**, that is, “deriving conclusions from given rational principles.”<sup>23</sup> If this means that Henry has fundamental presuppositions, it is true. He starts with the premise that the entire Bible is the Word of God, our only infallible guide to faith and practice. He insists that we must derive our theology from clear statements and legitimate inferences from the Scriptures, not from extra-biblical considerations or concepts. Indeed, most of *God, Revelation and Authority* consists of a sustained defense of the Bible as the only proper starting point for theological reflection; Henry repeatedly criticizes those approaches which arise from human ideas and speculation.

Furthermore, he operates on the conviction that the Bible contains information about God and his ways that is clear enough to be understood. “God in his revelation is the first principle of

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17. Henry, 1.91.

18. Henry, 1.91.

19. Henry, 1.93.

20. Henry, 1.94.

21. Henry, 1.95.

22. Henry, 1.95.

23. Donald Bloesch, *Essentials*, 2.268.

Christian theology, from which all the truths of revealed religion are derived.”<sup>24</sup> He knows that the Bible conveys not only information, and is intended to lead us to real wisdom – the saving knowledge of God – but he insists that the words in the Bible do reflect, and communicate, intelligible revelation from God. But here we must be careful, for Henry thinks that these assumptions arise from a proper reading of the Bible itself. In other words, he did not start with these ideas and construct a theological system upon them. Rather, his preliminary encounter with the Bible as a new believer convinced him that this is the very Word of God, a Word which could be comprehended enough to communicate also with others. So, even his presuppositions arose from his response to what he read in the Scriptures. “The Christian religion does not dangle midair on a postulational skyhook; it is anchored in God’s self-revelation.”<sup>25</sup>

He has also been charged with: **“advocating a God who reveals himself only in Euclidean terms . . .”**<sup>26</sup>

Euclid was a Greek mathematician, famous for his textbook on geometry, the *Elements*, which argued from axioms to theorems to produce proofs, concluding with the confident, “*Q.E.D.*” Let us assume that this criticism refers to Henry’s belief that theology is, in some sense, a “science,” “in the deepest sense because it presumes to account in an intelligible and orderly way for whatever is legitimate in every sphere of life and learning.”

Of course, Christian theology differs fundamentally from much of modern science, for it does not base itself only – or even chiefly – upon empirical observation derived by the senses, and because it does not exalt human reason above divine revelation as its fundamental way of knowing. But theology, like any body of knowledge (the original sense of “science”), “is interested no less than any other science in discussing presuppositions and principles, sources and data, purposes or objectives, methods of knowing, verifiability and falsifiability.”<sup>27</sup> This way of speaking of theology grates upon modern Christian sensibilities, accustomed as they are to think of faith as personal rather than propositional. Our age has lost confidence in “the assured results of science” and yearns for experience that is not simply cognitive and rational.

So, we must ask what Henry means. Does he – as the criticism quoted above implies – think that our God is a set of impersonal mathematical proofs, known by cold reasoning and ironclad logic? Of course not! That is a caricature, possible only to those who have not read his works carefully. Henry merely means to say that God has revealed himself in such a way that he can be known, his revelation can be understood, the Bible makes sense, and we can talk about God in ways that others can understand. Indeed, those theologians who criticize Henry for being “scientific” themselves try to persuade others by the facts and the logic of their argument! Most

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24. Bloesch, 2.215.

25. Bloesch, 2.219.

26. Patterson, 164ff.

27. Henry, 1.203.

Christian writers seek to present their case cogently and coherently, which is all that Henry says he is assaying to do.

To be sure, Henry does speak of axioms and theorems as appropriate for theology, but does this mean that he envisions a process that is coldly mathematical and leads merely to a set of rationally-deduced principles, rather than a vital knowledge of the living God? Not at all. He is simply trying to recognize that systematic theology, by definition, is *systematic* – it seeks to presents the doctrines of the Bible in an orderly, consistent, and coherent fashion. For Henry, then, “axioms” and “theorems” refer to vital truths derived from the Bible and presented in way that shows their mutual inter-relatedness. Far from being a set of random observations of, and responses to, the revelation of the Scriptures, theology aims to arrange the treatment of biblical themes in a way that makes sense and carries persuasive power.

We must admit that Henry possibly did not realize the extent to which his use of the noun “science” to describe theology would generate massive opposition, approaching revulsion, among evangelicals. Though he did his best to define what he meant by “science” and was obviously aware of the revolt against “modern” rationalism, and science in particular, as we have seen, he did not, perhaps, appreciate how viscerally some evangelicals would react to his use of terms like “reason,” “rational,” “axiom,” and “theorem.”

Or did he? Much of his theological project was aimed at combating the rising anti-rationalism, even irrationalism, of twentieth-century theology, and he often lamented the emotionalism, shallowness, and fuzzy thinking of all too many evangelical leaders and thinkers. Maybe he chose his terms deliberately, in an almost desperate attempt to rescue a baby that was in danger of being thrown out with the bathwater.

**“Insisting that religious beliefs and moral convictions stand up to the test of logic and reason.”**

Henry admits: “To be sure [evangelical theology] insists that reason is the test of truth. But by true knowledge it means nothing more or less than truth as God knows and reveals it.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Henry believes that the Bible, which is God’s self-revelation of the truth, will not contradict itself. Reason does not invent truth; it discovers truth by carefully examining the scriptural witness.

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency is a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.<sup>29</sup>

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28. Henry, 1.93.

29. Henry, 1.215.

Divine revelation is thus the “basic theological axiom” of Christian theology.<sup>30</sup> This fact “in no way nullifies the corollary truth that the triune God is Christianity’s basic ontological axiom.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Henry is not unaware that theology is primarily *about* God; he is merely saying that to know God, we must seek the truth as it is found in his revelation, especially in the Bible.

**“Placing an undue emphasis on ‘the law of non-contradiction.’”**

Carl Henry certainly did insist that the law of non-contradiction plays a crucial role in all human thought and discourse: “Distinctively human experience presupposes the law of non-contradiction and the irreducible distinction between truth and error; man cannot repudiate these logical presuppositions without sacrificing the intelligibility of what he says and does and his own mental coherence.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, Van Til, Conn, McGrath, and others who disparage the emphasis that Henry (and his mentor Gordon Clark) place on the law of non-contradiction can do so only by assuming that same “law”! With regard to this matter, either Henry is right or he is wrong; he cannot be both right and wrong at the same time. And his critics say he is wrong! What does “wrong” mean, unless there is a fundamental contradiction between “right” and “wrong,” between truth and error?

To claim that Henry believes that the “law of non-contradiction” exists independently of God is to misunderstand his thought. After all, the Bible declares that “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all,”<sup>33</sup> he cannot lie,<sup>34</sup> and Jesus is the Truth.<sup>35</sup> All such descriptions of God imply something like a “law of non-contradiction” within God himself. Not, of course, as an independent “law” standing outside of God that he must obey, but as part of the fundamental constitution of the mind of God – of the Logos – which distinguishes between truth and error, “light” and “darkness,” good and evil, holy and profane, right and wrong.

It is in the context of God’s sovereignty and total freedom that Henry discusses the nature of the law of non-contradiction, which “does not set limits to which God must conform; God himself wills the law of non-contradiction as integral to both divine and human meaning. . . . The laws of logic are the way God thinks; they are the organization of the divine mind.”<sup>36</sup> God cannot speak what is both true and false at the same time; indeed, he cannot directly speak anything that is false (excluding from this discussion the record of Satan’s lies in the Bible). He *cannot* lie. He has bound himself to truth, for his very mind – his Logos – is truth itself. Thus, when Henry

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30. Henry, 1.216.

31. Henry, 1.219.

32. Henry, 2.126.

33. 1 John 1:5.

34. Hebrews 6:18.

35. John 14:6.

36. Henry, 4.319.

speaks of the “law” of non-contradiction, he is only referring to a “law” that underlies all human thought and communication, one that is assumed in everything we say and do. This “law” is implanted in us because we are created in the image of God, who distinguishes absolutely between truth and error, fact and falsehood, reality and non-reality, God and not-God. In his own words:

The laws of logic are the “architecture” or organization of the divine mind. They are the systematic arrangement of God’s mind or the way God thinks. The laws of logic, therefore, have an ultimate ontological reality. God is the author of all meaning, the foundation of all facts; his thought is ultimately decisive for all predication.<sup>37</sup>

We simply cannot escape the fact that our minds distinguish between truth and error, and that all our value judgments assume and express this basic element of our mental nature. Another point: Not only Christians, but all humans, think and speak out of this fundamental reality. God addresses humans as “reasonable” (that is, capable of reason) beings. That is what Henry means by the universal presence of the law of non-contradiction in both humans and in their Maker. Or, as he puts it, “Those who argue that God is illogical and then presume to say anything ontologically significant about him, indulge in religious babbling.”<sup>38</sup>

#### **“Being “overly concerned with . . . propositional revelation.”**

True, Henry does insist upon propositional revelation throughout *God, Revelation and Authority* and especially in Volume III, Chapters 24-28.

- “If revelation is a communication of sharable truth, it will consist of sentences, propositions, judgments, and not simply of isolated concepts.”<sup>39</sup>
- “God . . . does not utter illogicalities. . . . Meaningful divine revelation involves communication in intelligible sentences.”<sup>40</sup>

Another objection is that “propositional truth depersonalizes revelation by turning it into abstract statements that dull the call for decision and obedience. . . . But if the call for decision and obedience rests upon imperatives that cannot be logically analyzed, and are not answerable to the claims of truth, then no rational creature ought to be bound by such demands.”<sup>41</sup> He goes on:

- “A reading of the New Testament will quickly show . . . that the verb *believe* (*pisteuo*) does in fact have doctrinal truths or propositional statements as its

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37. Henry, 4.334.

38. Henry, 4.334.

39. Henry, 3.429.

40. Henry, 3.430.

41. Henry, 3.433.

object; it is therefore untrue to the Gospels and Epistles to say that the object of belief is properly only a person.”<sup>42</sup>

- “A proposition is a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted, or denied.”<sup>43</sup>
- “We mean by propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicates his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express forms of cognitive truths, and that the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory.”<sup>44</sup>

Is God “more” than what he has revealed in the Bible? Of course! But without the propositional revelation in the Bible, we would not know of this transcendence of God. “Apart from meaningful and true cognitive information, one could not know that a presence is that of Yahweh, or speak confidently of God’s personality and selfhood, or even of transcendent reality.”<sup>45</sup>

After these preliminary definitions and answers to objections, Henry backs his position with an extensive review of the Scriptures, which he finds to be composed of intelligible statements, though of course expressed in various genres, such as poetry. But “The LORD is my shepherd” is still a proposition. Furthermore, contrary to the claim by Roger Olson that “Henry’s view of divine revelation may seem to imply that all the nonpropositional forms of revelation are unimportant compared with propositional revelation,”<sup>46</sup> Henry states explicitly that “the Bible itself attests the considerable variety in God’s revealing activity by depicting divine disclosure not by one particular term but by a vast range of descriptive concepts.”<sup>47</sup> Against those who would restrict God’s revelation to the Bible itself, he writes, “The God of the Bible is the God who revealed himself in dreams and visions, in theophany and incarnation, in words and writings. His multiform ways of revelation defy simplistic reduction.”<sup>48</sup>

Henry understands that not everything in the Bible is a proposition:

It is the case that in the Bible God not only reveals sentences, or propositional truths, but also reveals his Name, or names, and that he gives divine commands. Commands do not assert a truth and are not propositions. Such disclosures assuredly are capable of being formulated propositionally, but that is admittedly something other than expressly identifying them as propositional disclosure. Yet even the revelation of God’s name requires a meaningful context for intelligibility; isolated concepts do not convey truths. . .

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42. Henry, 3.438.

43. Henry, 3.456.

44. Henry, 3.457.

45. Henry, 3.459.

46. Roger Olson, *Westminster Handbook*, 46.

47. Henry, 2.79.

48. Henry, 2.80.

. If it is too much to say that divine revelation must be propositionally given to be both meaningful and true, it is nonetheless wholly necessary to insist that divine disclosure does indeed take propositional form.<sup>49</sup>

One last point to make on this subject: Those who say that revelation is not propositional do so with an abundance of propositions, which they expect to be believed.

Those who think Carl Henry too “rationalistic” naturally think he is constantly **forgetting that “our theology will forever fall short of the mind of God . . . [and that] we do not possess the truth, since reason is always the servant and never the master or determiner of revelation.”**

The third of his *Fifteen Theses on Divine Revelation* states clearly that “Divine revelation does not completely erase God’s transcendent mystery, inasmuch as God the Revealer transcends his own revelation. The revelation given to man is not exhaustive of God. The God of revelation transcends his creation, transcends his activity, transcends his own disclosure. We do not ‘see everything from God’s point of view.’ Even the chosen apostles concede that their knowledge on the basis of divine revelation is but ‘in part’ and not yet ‘face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12).”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, “It is sheer delusion for any contemporary theologian, however devout or gifted, to think that he or she has fully mastered God’s truth as God knows it.”<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, “Although we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know him truly and adequately. Although we cannot know him apart from our finitude, we can know him as creatures divinely intended to apprehend their Creator. Although we can know him only through the forms of our understanding, these divinely created forms convey reliable knowledge about God.”<sup>52</sup>

Henry is also faulted for: **holding that “the truth of revelation can be known prior to becoming a Christian,” “giving reason a creative role prior to faith,” and not emphasizing enough “the idea that the unbeliever’s mind is depraved and the believer’s mind is enlightened by grace, that our knowledge of God is a pure gift and not a rational or philosophical achievement.”**

Henry did believe that man was created in the image of God, and thus endowed with a rationality that makes thought and understanding of some truth possible. The image of God in man includes both a rational and a moral component. Even unregenerate men and women can distinguish between good and evil; truth and error; right and wrong; and God and not-God. They

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49. Henry, 2.480-1.

50. Henry, 2.9.

51. Henry, 5.376.

52. Henry, 5.376.

may not know the truth about God, but the concepts named above are embedded in every person's mind.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Henry refers often to "the noetic effects of sin" and to "what Christian theologians call the epistemic predicament of finite and sinful man," that incapacitates us from knowing truth apart from revelation.<sup>54</sup> He repeatedly refers to "the Christian demand that the presumptions of every cultural ear be tested from the standpoint of transcendent revelation."<sup>55</sup>

Despite the Fall, which includes the mind, however, "the nature of truth is such that the Christian revelation is formally intelligible to all men; it convincingly overlaps ineradicable elements of everyman's experience, and offers a more consistent, more comprehensive and more satisfactory explanation of the meaning and worth of life than do other views."<sup>56</sup> Thus, the non-believer can understand much of what the Christian is saying, even if he disagrees and fails to submit to God's truth. As a fellow creature, he can be engaged in meaningful dialogue, even if only faith in God's revelation alone will bring him true comprehension. If the non-believer has no capacity to think reasonably, then all Christian evangelism and apologetics are useless. Henry is merely saying that non-Christians have minds that work the same way the Christian minds work, even though they are darkened and ignorant.

**Not understanding that "Revelation, not reason, must be the final authority."**

Henry says, on the contrary, "Human reason is a divinely fashioned instrument for recognizing truth; it is not a creative source of truth."<sup>57</sup> Why must revelation precede and control reason? Because "human reason is not a source of infallible truth about ultimate reality."<sup>58</sup>

Christianity depicts itself . . . not as a supremely constructed metaphysical theory, but as a revelation, differing in kind from secular philosophies grounded in rational reflection. . . Its basic premise is that the living God should be allowed to speak for himself and to define the abiding role of reason and the meaning of revelation. . . the rationalistic approach subordinates the truth of revelation to its own alternatives and has speculated itself into exhaustion.<sup>59</sup>

**"Holding that revelation can be comprehended by reason alone."**

In Volume III of *God, Revelation and Authority*, Henry devotes an entire chapter to "The Spirit as Divine Illuminator."

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53. Henry, 2.125-6.

54. Henry, 1.91.

55. Henry, 1.92.

56. Henry, 1.238.

57. Henry, 1.225.

58. Henry, 1.91.

59. Henry, 1.95.

God intends that Scripture should function in our lives as his Spirit-illuminated Word. It is the Spirit who opens man's being to a keen personal awareness of God's revelation. The Spirit empowers us to receive and appropriate Scriptures, and promotes in us a normative theological comprehension for a transformed life. The Spirit gives a vital current focus to historical revelation and makes it powerfully real.<sup>60</sup>

The ministry of the Spirit of God . . . is as essential and unique in enlivening God's revelation in the lives of his people as it is in the phenomena of divine incarnation and divine inspiration.<sup>61</sup>

The Spirit illumines Scripture, evokes trust in God, and regenerates contrite sinners.<sup>62</sup>

### **Henry's approach constitutes "Greek theism."<sup>63</sup>**

It is hard to know whether to laugh or to cry at this caricature. The same charge is often leveled against proponents of traditional Christian theism by those advocating "openness" theology, whose own fierce attacks on Carl Henry are thus not surprising. Greek thought was marked by confidence in virtually unaided human reason to understand ultimate truth, ignorance of divine revelation, and a concept of God as impersonal. None of these characterize the theology of Carl Henry.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that the foregoing discussion has shown that the charge that Carl Henry is in any sense a rationalist is totally without foundation.

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60. Henry, 3.273.

61. Henry, 3.278.

62. Henry, 3.278.

63. Conn, 139. In his two chapters on "neo-evangelicalism," Conn makes a number of sweeping generalizations which would seem to include Henry in their broad rejection of that movement, but which do not apply to Henry. Such sloppiness is both bad scholarship and unreliable polemics, to say the least.

## Carl Henry on Propositional Revelation

Carl F.H. Henry has often been called the “dean” of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American evangelical theologians. When Henry’s *God, Revelation and Authority (GRA)* first appeared, his six-volume *magnum opus* was praised as “the most important work of evangelical theology in modern times.”<sup>64</sup> Among other contributions, he was lauded for the massive case he made for the authority of Scripture in the first four volumes of *God, Revelation and Authority*.

One key plank in Henry’s doctrine of revelation was his insistence that, in his words, “As an achievement of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, Scripture presents us with the remarkable phenomenon of a canon concerned primarily with the propositional disclosure of God.”<sup>65</sup> Aware that this conviction stood in opposition to the prevailing theological winds, he devoted considerable energy to expounding and defending this central element of his theological program. He clarified what he meant and what he did not mean, and he countered common objections from all points on the theological spectrum.

At one time, this belief in propositional revelation would have been assumed by evangelical theologians, but things have changed drastically in the past few decades, and now Henry is widely criticized by leading evangelicals for just this position. Henry worked out his views in dialogue with other points of view and to refute those he considered erroneous, but he also anticipated criticisms that have been made since *GRA* was published. In my opinion, most of this subsequent criticism seems to stem from a lack of understanding of what he actually said and meant. That is not to say that Henry’s thought is complete or without error, but only to assert that many of the objections to his stance on propositional revelation appear to reflect either ignorance or a fundamental misreading of Henry’s own words.<sup>66</sup>

To substantiate this claim, I shall briefly explain what Henry meant by propositional revelation, especially in contrast to other views. At the same time, I shall use his own words to respond to criticisms that have been made since he wrote *GRA*, referring frequently to a recent unpublished dissertation by Michael White as an example of what I consider to be a major misunderstanding and misstatement of Henry’s intentions.<sup>67</sup> White’s study is important, since it was written under the supervision of Kevin Vanhoozer, a leading evangelical theologian, and reflects a very popular school of thought. Though his dissertation reflects wide reading and careful thought, as well as more appreciation for Henry than some others have expressed, it seems to me that he often either ignores or distorts Henry’s actual position.

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64. Kenneth Briggs, *New York Times*, quoted on dust jacket of Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*. Hereafter referred to as *GRA*.

65. Henry, 3.96.

66. See G. Wright Doyle, *Carl Henry: Theologian for All Seasons*, for more elaboration on this point.

67. Michael D. White, “Word and Spirit.”

*What is a proposition?*

We begin with Carl Henry's definitions of propositions and of propositional revelation.<sup>68</sup>

"A proposition is a verbal statement that is either true or false; it is a rational declaration capable of being either believed, doubted, or denied."<sup>69</sup> Most basically, propositions are "intelligible sentences."<sup>70</sup> "God's word in the creation of the cosmos is not a cryptic, paradoxical or superrational word, but takes the form of intelligible, orderly sentences, e.g., 'Let there be light' (cf. Gen 1:3)."<sup>71</sup> These sentences are "units of thought."<sup>72</sup>

"If revelation is a communication of sharable truth, it will consist of sentences, propositions, judgments, and not simply of isolated concepts, names or words." Words alone do not convey meaning; "they become fully intelligible only if they express thought, ideas, beliefs – in short, propositions."<sup>73</sup>

"The historic Christian view is that divine revelation takes the form of propositionally given truths set down in the linguistic form of inspired *verba*. The locus of the meaning and truth of Christian language is to be found, not in the empirical correlates of words, nor in an inner existential response to which words are said to point, but in the Bible as an inspired literary deposit of divinely revealed truths."<sup>74</sup>

Henry's definition of a proposition includes narrative statements: "Most of the sentences in Scripture are historical assertions or explanations of such assertions."<sup>75</sup> He writes, "Of course, much of revelation consists of history, and thus is 'tensed,' but it is still as timelessly true as is the truth of mathematics."<sup>76</sup>

He thus clearly includes historical narrative within the definition of propositional revelation.<sup>77</sup> Speaking of historical narrative, Henry calls it revelation as "an inspired propositional-verbal interpretation of God's literal historical disclosure."<sup>78</sup> That is to say, the Bible is "a body of divinely revealed truths."<sup>79</sup>

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68. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*.

69. Henry, 3.456.

70. Henry, 3.302.

71. Henry, 3.390.

72. Henry, 3.430.

73. Henry, 3.446.

74. Henry, 3.453.

75. Henry, 3.456.

76. Henry, 3.474.

77. Henry, 3.262.

78. Henry, 3.255.

79. Henry, 3.302.

Going further, Henry elaborates, “When we speak of propositional revelation we are not, however, referring to the obvious fact that the Bible, like other literature, is written in sentences or logically formed statements. The Bible depicts God’s revelation as meaningful, objectively intelligible disclosure. We mean by propositional revelation that God supernaturally communicated his revelation to chosen spokesmen in the express form of cognitive truths, and that the inspired prophetic-apostolic proclamation reliably articulates these truths in sentences that are not internally contradictory.”<sup>80</sup>

“The inspired Scriptures contain a body of divinely given information actually expressed or capable of being expressed in propositions. In brief, the Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging truth of God.”<sup>81</sup>

“Revelation is that activity of the supernatural God whereby he communicates information essential for man’s present and future destiny. . . . God shares his thought with man; in this self-disclosure God unveils his very own mind; he communicates not only the truth about himself and his intentions, but also that concerning man’s present plight and future prospects.”<sup>82</sup>

From these quotations, we learn that Henry was expressing his position in contrast to other views of revelation. First, he asserts that the basic unit of meaning does not lie in individual words or even names spoken in isolation, but in full sentences. Second, he disagrees with those who say that God’s revelation is composed not of sentences but of concepts. He insists that concepts lack meaning if they cannot be expressed in intelligible sentences. Third, to be intelligible, sentences must be logically coherent and not internally inconsistent. Fourth, he believes that meaning inheres in the biblical text, and not in the response of the reader also.<sup>83</sup> Finally, God’s verbal revelation conveys reliable information, or truth, about himself and his purposes towards mankind. The Bible is not a collection of vague, content-less musings, but a body of intelligible statements that convey abiding truth in the form of particular true sentences.

Contrary to what some critics seem to believe, Henry was well aware that biblical revelation consists of a variety of genres, literary styles, and modes of expression. “By its emphasis that divine revelation is propositional, Christian theology in no way denies that the Bible conveys its message in many literary forms such as letters, poetry and parable, prophecy and history. What it stresses, rather, is that the truth conveyed by God through these various forms has conceptual adequacy, and that in all cases the literary teaching is part of a divinely inspired message that conveys the truth of divine revelation . . . and of course the expression of

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80. Henry, 3.457.

81. Henry, 3.457.

82. Henry, 3.457.

83. See William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 189, and Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 408-410, and elsewhere, for a similar point of view.

truth in other forms that the customary prose does not preclude expressing that truth in declarative proposition.”<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, he reminds us that “[i]n rejecting the neo-orthodox insistence that divine revelation is non-propositional, however, evangelicals face the danger of rigidly insisting that all divine disclosure is propositional, thereby going beyond the scriptural data and even falling into a rationalistic reconstruction of the biblical representation of revelation . . .”<sup>85</sup>

Nevertheless, he writes, “Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these [biblical] writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false.”<sup>86</sup>

As for imperatives – commands – Henry writes: “Even though commands are not expressed in valid propositional form, they nonetheless yield cognitive inferences: ‘Thou shalt not kill!’ implies at very least that to murder is wrong. Moreover, while imperatives are neither true nor false, they can be translated into propositions. ‘Rise and eat,’ for example, can be expressed as ‘God said to Peter, “Rise and eat.”’ “As for aesthetic or other experience, it, too, can be expressed propositionally insofar as it has objective cognitive content or includes moral obligation.”<sup>87</sup>

### *Responses to objections*

Henry knows that some evangelicals “hesitate to say that God’s revelation is expressed or conveyed exclusively in a rational and objectively true form. They affirm instead that, in addition to God’s frequent and possibly even normal conveyance of revelation in propositional form, God sometimes discloses himself in other than propositional modes,” such as in dreams or visions.<sup>88</sup> “But, it should be indicated, the extraverbal and extrarational belong only to the rim of revelation; revelation in its essential definition centers in the communication of God’s Word.”<sup>89</sup>

Nor is he unaware of the frequent assertion that God reveals not propositions, but himself as a person, and that there is more to be known of God than can be, or has been expressed, in propositions about him. He says: “Sometimes it is said that God’s self-revelation takes two forms: one, that of propositional revelation . . . and the other, that of sheer personal presence. In this latter case the revealing of the person is distinguished from the revealing of truths about the person. The revelation of the living God, it is said, surely cannot be exhausted in any system of

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84. Henry, 3.463.

85. Henry, 3.481.

86. Henry, 4.453.

87. Henry, 3.477.

88. Henry, 3.457.

89. Henry, 3.457.

propositional truths, however comprehensive. Since God is supernatural spirit, and transcends our finite knowledge, which as such can never exhaust the Infinite, there is far more to God, we are told, than what can be stated in propositional terms about him. Here the objection to propositional revelation stems from a confusion of ontology and epistemology. God is indeed ontologically other than man – and would survive the destruction of all mankind and the evaporation of all the truths humanly cognized about him – but we know even this as a revealed propositional truth.”<sup>90</sup>

“If self-revelation is contrasted with a disclosure of information, then on what basis does one propose to distinguish such nonrational ‘self-revelation’ as authentically divine rather than demonic or merely psychological?”<sup>91</sup> “Apart from meaningful and true cognitive information, one could not know that a presence is that of Yahweh, or speak confidently of God’s personality and selfhood, or even of transcendent reality.”<sup>92</sup> This sort of concept really “opens the door to subjectivity.”<sup>93</sup>

“We may indeed speak of a divine ‘more’ in relation to the body of revealed truth.” For example, “eschatological revelation [as in Moltmann] will someday assuredly clarify some matters that are now obscure. There are doubtless more propositional truths about God and his purposes than we presently know. But we deny that a contrast between divine self-revelation and propositional truths is therefore necessary. The content of God’s progressive revelation is propositionally given or expressible.”

Responding to another common, and unfounded criticism, he says, “No evangelical has, of course, ever contended that sinners are saved by propositions; what evangelicals do emphasize is that the inspired prophets and apostles teach divinely revealed truths.”<sup>94</sup> Indeed, “[k]nowledge of revelational truths is indispensable for the salvation of sinners; saving faith in Christ involves appropriating divinely disclosed information.”<sup>95</sup>

One very common objection to the idea that God reveals himself in propositions is the concept that the meaning of a passage of the Bible includes not only the content of what is said, but the effect upon the reader (Michael White often makes this criticism). To this Henry replies: “Evangelical scholarship should deplore the confusion that results from the hermeneutical tendency of identifying verbal meaning with personal significance. There is no better rule for interpreting the Bible or any other literary work than to find out what the author meant.”<sup>96</sup> In

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90. Henry, 3.459.

91. Henry, 3.458.

92. Henry, 3.459.

93. Henry, 3.459.

94. Henry, 3.465.

95. Henry, 3.460.

96. Henry, 4.308.

other words, meaning is found in the text, not in the response of the reader; that is an entirely different thing.

As if Carl Henry, who held three graduate degrees in theology, did not understand the most basic rule of biblical interpretation, namely, that context determines meaning, Michael White claims that Henry misunderstands the true nature of propositions. For example, he says, “The sentence is a necessary, but not sufficient component in communicating a proposition. Other elements in written communication, chiefly genre, contribute clues which help insure that the communicative act intended by the author is achieved. The contrast with Henry can now be observed: rather than inhering strictly in bare words and sentences, truth is a function of a larger communicative framework which places the necessary semantic context – words and sentences – within a pragmatic context where the syntactic features serve the communicative will of the author.”<sup>97</sup>

It seems that White did not read the following passage in *GRA* carefully enough: “We must champion the indispensable importance of historical and philological exegesis in identifying the content of the scripturally given revelation and must acknowledge that authorial cognitive intention is ultimately definitive for textual meaning.”<sup>98</sup> Henry advocates “seeking the meaning of a passage through textual analysis with an eye on the author’s intention in view of his time, place and the literary genre employed.” Note that meaning resides in a *passage*, not isolated sentences. He endorses Richard France’s statement urging “the fullest possible use of linguistic, literary, historical, archaeological and other data bearing on that author’s environment.”<sup>99</sup> He constantly talks about the necessity of “historical-grammatical exegesis,” the first rule of which, of course, is that context determines meaning.<sup>100</sup>

All too frequently, Henry’s position is caricatured as a narrow focus on so-called “bare,” or “static” propositions that only communicate information, as if he did not believe that the reader’s response to scriptural revelation was important. Michael White’s dissertation makes just such a claim, in a variety of ways. For example, he says that for Henry, “knowing God is primarily a matter of apprehending propositions.”<sup>101</sup> He asks, rhetorically, “But does present-day, belief-ful response profit nothing to the reader of Scripture?”<sup>102</sup> Joined to this are charges that Henry believes that God’s purpose in giving us the Scriptures was only to convey information. He writes, “Above all Henry is concerned to preserve Scripture as an objective, communicative word from God. And surely Scripture is this. But Henry’s preservation of the

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97. White, “Word and Spirit,” 141-142.

98. Henry, 4.314-315.

99. R.T. France, “Inerrancy and New Testament Exegesis,” 13, *Themelios*, cited in *GRA*, 4.394.

100. Henry, 3.104

101. White, 110.

102. White, 159.

objective nature of Scripture has the unfortunate result of reducing Scripture to a mere object.<sup>103</sup> This can be seen in at least three emphases: 1. “*An Over-Emphasis on Epistemology*. Henry consistently treats the Scriptures as an epistemological source book whose chief end is to convey information . . . While the Bible certainly informs, such a view of Scripture unfortunately neglects broader functions of God’s Word, such as mediating the presence of God, creating a Christocentric community, and judging sin and calling forth righteousness.”<sup>104</sup>

In other words, like some others, White accuses Henry of believing both that God’s main reason for revealing himself in Scripture is to communicate information, and that the only response intended is an intellectual apprehension of the “bare” meaning of the Bible. We can only guess at where such an ill-founded notion came from, but it could not have arisen from a close reading of *GRA*, for Henry would have been aghast at both of these suggestions. After all, he was at heart an evangelist, as his countless evangelistic sermons and lectures attest. Let us listen to his own words on the necessity of a proper appropriation of revelation for one’s eternal salvation. In his thesis that revelation is for the benefit of mankind, Henry says that revelation’s benefits are for “all who personally receive his gracious offer in obedient trust.” “The human response to God’s disclosure is either acceptance or rejection, faith or unbelief. . . . [t]he entrance of God’s light looks far beyond mere conveyance of astonishing information to redemptive enlistment of the whole person. . . . [The Bible] insists on the indispensability of spiritual knowledge that correlates life with light and with obedience. But the Bible resounds as well with a divinely initiated plea for a requirement of personal reconciliation . . . By addressing the human mind and confronting the human will, God’s revelation requires a decision that encompasses the whole self. It calls us to inner repentance, to a reversal of life-style, to redemptive renewal and to obedient fellowship. The truth of God . . . is not simply to be known, but is also to be done.”<sup>105</sup>

In words that could not be clearer, he says “Salvation is conditioned upon personally accepting and appropriating the truth of revelation. . . . The comprehension of revelation must therefore not be confused with the appropriation of salvation.”<sup>106</sup> Again: “Knowledge of revelational truths is indispensable for the salvation of sinners; saving faith in Christ involves appropriating divinely disclosed information.”<sup>107</sup>

As for the purpose God has in revealing himself through his written Word, Henry is both clear and eloquent:

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103. White, 152.

104. White, 144.

105. Henry, 2.44-5.

106. Henry, 2.45.

107. Henry, 4.460.

“Thesis Two: Divine revelation is given for human benefit, offering us privileged communion with our Creator in the kingdom of God.”<sup>108</sup> “God’s purpose in revelation is that we may know him personally as he is, may avail ourselves of his gracious forgiveness and offer of new life, may escape catastrophic judgment for our sins, and venture personal fellowship with him.”<sup>109</sup> “His revelation is not some impersonal mass media communication . . . it is rather, a personal call and command to each individual. . . . Because of it human beings everywhere at this very moment have the prospect of peace and hope, of purity and happiness.”<sup>110</sup>

“The Holy Spirit attends the gathered church to nurture the obedient hearing of God’s Word by rebuking, convicting, exhorting and enabling the listener.”<sup>111</sup> “God’s revelation fulfills its divine purpose when knowledge of it transforms life and living in the modern world as fully as it did when the first believers responded to God’s grace.”<sup>112</sup>

“What God proposes to write upon man’s heart deals at once with both divine knowledge and human obedience.”<sup>113</sup> “The New Testament writings repeatedly associate the truth of God’s revelation with the transforming power of divine redemption.”<sup>114</sup> “The emphasis on the transforming Word and the transforming Spirit (Eph. 2:5) by which believers are fashioned by divine ‘workmanship’ into doing the good works that God intends them to perform in Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:10, RSV) is prominent throughout Paul’s letters.”<sup>115</sup>

“The penitent reborn renegade will gladly concede that in Scripture the Spirit of God personally addresses each of us, speaking to us what he first spoke to the inspired writers and still speaks through them as he becomes our lifelong companion and counselor.”<sup>116</sup>

White further accuses Henry of: 2. “*A Preoccupation with Propositions*. The Bible is further objectified in Henry’s account as Henry focuses on propositions as the locus of divine revelation and biblical truth. But while undoubtedly the Bible contains propositions – and Henry is to be thanked for affirming this strongly against modernist critics – Henry takes the additional step of locating truth in propositions instead of God’s overarching communicative act. But as I have argued above, while biblical truth contains propositions and can be expressed propositionally, it is properly an illocutionary act – which is comprised of propositions – that conveys truth and not bare propositions. Yet the latter is Henry’s emphasis.”<sup>117</sup>

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108. Henry, 2.30.

109. Henry, 2.31.

110. Henry, 2.31.

111. Henry, 4.479.

112. Henry, 4.481.

113. Henry, 4.496.

114. Henry, 4.496.

115. Henry, 4.497.

116. Henry, 4.282-3.

117. White, 145.

First of all, the question is whether meaning resides in the text or also in the mind of the reader. Once again, he confuses purpose and effect with content and nature; the latter are what Henry is talking about here. Secondly, and more importantly for my purposes here, White thinks that Henry objectifies the Bible as if it were an inert, passive repository of bare information.

This charge ignores vast swaths of *GRA* and could be refuted by not only paragraphs, but chapters! For example:

“Divine revelation is personal,” Henry asserts clearly, and alludes to Israel’s response as “worship in prayer, praise, and confession,”<sup>118</sup> and he recalls Jesus’ promise that he “would both send the COMFORTER and himself come to indwell his followers personally as intimate spiritual experience.”<sup>119</sup> Or, “Revelation occurs on God’s R-Day as an act of transcendent disclosure. It pulses with the surprise of foreign invasion, and opens before us like the suddenly parted Red Sea waters. It stirs us like the angelic hosts who appeared unscheduled to proclaim Messiah’s birth, or overawes us like the rushing mighty wind of Pentecost.”<sup>120</sup>

Again, “The wonder and astonishment elicited by the revelation of God permeate both Old and New Testaments, and the recurring themes of God’s remarkable love and terrible judgment, and his rule and direction of his people evoke the awe of the faithful.”<sup>121</sup>

Responding to the charge that he holds a view of revelation that is “static” and not “dynamic,” Henry writes, “While the personal appropriation of revelational truth is life-transforming, revelational truth is not properly called dynamic, if by this one promotes the supposed efficacy of non-intellective confrontation or presumes to define the nature of divine disclosure as the Scriptures teach.”<sup>122</sup>

So far, I have shown how Henry had anticipated criticisms and objections, and how strange it is that he is being accused of believing things that he must surely did not believe. It makes one wonder how well some of his critics have read *God, Revelation and Authority*.

Michael White has other criticisms of Henry, however. For example, he writes, “Henry’s account of propositions falters on another front: the problem of paraphrase.”<sup>123</sup> That is, whether non-propositional expressions can be expressed properly in propositions. He goes on: “The question is not whether non-propositional communication can be propositionally expressed, but

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118. Henry, 2.154.

119. Henry, 2.243.

120. Henry, 2.20.

121. Henry, 2.27.

122. Henry, 4.75.

123. White, 142.

rather whether it can be expressed *without cognitive loss*. Literary critics are united against the translatability of, for example, poetic language because the power and beauty of such language is inherently untranslatable. But Henry's desire for the objective revelation seemingly blinds him to this reality."<sup>124</sup>

To this criticism, I would suggest, first, that White is, once again, confusing the meaning of the content of a passage with the effect that it has upon the reader. Does he believe that Henry is blind to the aesthetic power of the Scriptures? Maybe not, but here he seems to imply that for Henry, style, as distinct from content, is not important. We know that Henry was fully aware that the Bible contains passages of poetry and even prose that are aesthetically powerful in their effect upon a humbler reader, and his own works are replete with long passages of great beauty and eloquence, but that is not what he is talking about when he says that the meaning of the passage can be expressed in propositions. As always, he distinguishes between what the author of a passage in the Bible meant, and how that passage affects the reader.

Second, although there is of course a difference between cognitive content and affective power, Henry is only saying that the objective content of even a poetic passage in the Bible can be expressed propositionally, without loss of cognitive content, even if unadorned prose has less of an impact upon the reader than the original poetic form. In other words, what loss of *cognitive content* occurs when a poetic or highly rhetorical prose passage is re-stated propositionally?

In another aspect of this criticism White, based on the same view of meaning, writes that "while we recognize the utility of the truth-conditional semantics, meaning is not merely correspondence to truth conditions but the success of a speaker's communicative act."<sup>125</sup>

First, I would say that this depends upon what you mean by "meaning." The author's meaning, or the meaning as understood by the reader? Henry chides Donald Bloesch for his distinction between "external" and "internal" meaning. He says, "[M]eaning is meaning, and attaches to logical propositions stated externally in print or verbally, or internally thought and either volitionally acted upon or disregarded. The test of whether one *personally believes* the propositions to be true as a basis for action lies in one's personal appropriation or nonappropriation of them in daily life. But such appropriation or nonappropriation does not establish the truth or falsity, the meaningfulness or meaninglessness, of propositions."<sup>126</sup>

Michael White and others like him make many other accusations against Henry's doctrine of revelation, which we don't have time to consider here. I have only focused on the

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124. White, 142-3.

125. White, 142, Note 144.

126. Henry, 4.282.

nature and purpose of propositional revelation in this paper, for it is central to Henry's overall program.

My major purpose has not been to show that Henry is correct, though I believe he is, but to demonstrate that many criticisms of him appear to stem from a fundamental misunderstanding of what he actually said, and to show that Henry anticipated, and responded to, most charges that have been made since the publication of *GRA*. Perhaps some of his critics would benefit from a more careful reading of his text before reading their own "meaning" into it.

## Carl Henry's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit's Role in Revelation

Carl Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority (GRA)* has been hailed as "the most important work of evangelical theology in modern times."<sup>127</sup> The first four volumes deal with the doctrine of revelation per se, and the last two volumes deal with the doctrine of God. Throughout, Henry discusses the combined and distinct actions of all three Persons of the Trinity, including the Holy Spirit, in the production, proclamation, and communicative impact of inscripturated revelation.

Nevertheless, Henry has been criticized for an insufficient exposition of the role of the Holy Spirit in our mental comprehension and believing reception – that is, appropriation – of the truths of Scripture, and an over-emphasis upon unaided human reason in the understanding and reception of God's written revelation.

One critic has even labeled his approach "sub-Trinitarian." This paper will first describe Henry's teaching on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the production of revelation, and then especially in our comprehension and response to Scripture. The second part will attempt to answer the charge that Henry minimizes the necessity of the Spirit's work and exaggerates the capacity of human reason.

Before going further, we should note that Henry clearly and forcefully expounds a robust presentation of the entirety of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as he is revealed in Scripture. Like all orthodox theologians, he holds to the personality and deity of the Spirit. In addition to his role in revelation, the distinctive operations of the Holy Spirit include: communicating the truth of Christ to us, convicting us of sin, enabling the powerful proclamation of the Word of God, granting power for worldwide witness, effecting regeneration, granting new life, indwelling believers, effecting our ongoing sanctification, bestowing gifts for ministry, producing moral fruit, and – in sum – bringing into our lives the very presence of Christ.<sup>128</sup> Henry repeatedly stresses the necessity of Christians being daily filled with the Spirit,<sup>129</sup> and speaks of the Christian life as "life in the Spirit."<sup>130</sup>

Now let us turn to Henry's doctrine of the role of the Holy Spirit in revelation.

### 1. The Trinitarian Nature of Revelation

According to Henry, revelation is the self-disclosure of God himself. The first chapter of Volume Two is entitled "The Awesome Disclosure of God." This title contains two meanings: 1.

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127. Kenneth Briggs, back cover of Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*.

128. *God, Revelation and Authority* (hereafter referred to as *GRA*), 6.337-400 (that is, Vol. 6, pgs 337-400).

129. For example, see Henry, *GRA* 3.163, and often.

130. Henry, 5.212. See also Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, Chapter Ten: "The Holy Spirit, The Christian Ethical Dynamic," 437-58.

All revelation comes as God's self-initiated activity, and is thus not the result of human discovery or invention, and 2. Revelation is the self-disclosure of God himself. As Thesis One says, "Revelation is a divinely initiated activity, God's free communication by which he alone turns his personal privacy into a deliberate disclosure of his reality."<sup>131</sup>

In essence, therefore, revelation, by which we here mean primarily revelation contained in Scripture, is the revelation of God himself – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Henry says in Thesis Six, "God's revelation is uniquely personal both in content and form,"<sup>132</sup> centering upon the disclosure of his personal names.<sup>133</sup> The Old Testament names, such as Elohim, Adonai, El Elyon, and especially Yahweh, refer to the entire Godhead. For Henry, therefore, the entire Trinity is the initiator, content, and agent of revelation. Divine revelation, by definition, is a Trinitarian act. In a summary statement, he describes God as "the self-revealing God."

Having said that, however, Henry goes further to say that "God reveals himself not only universally in the history of the cosmos and all of the nations, but also redemptively, within this external history, in unique saving acts. God reveals himself particularly in his election-love of the Hebrews . . . and supremely in the gift of his promised Son and in the founding of the church of Christ."<sup>134</sup> Here we see the work of Christ the Son in redemption and his coming again, as well as in the founding of the church at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit.

Thesis Eight states that "the climax of God's special revelation is Jesus of Nazareth, the personal incarnation of God in the flesh; in Jesus Christ the source and the content of revelation converge and coincide."<sup>135</sup> Not only is Christ the climax of the content of revelation but, as Thesis Nine goes on, "The mediating agent in all divine revelation is the Eternal Logos – preexistent, incarnate, and now glorified."<sup>136</sup>

Thesis Twelve says, "The Holy Spirit superintends the communication of divine revelation, first, by inspiring the prophetic-apostolic writings, and second, by illuminating and interpreting the scripturally given Word of God."<sup>137</sup>

In sum, though Henry acknowledges the different roles that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit play, he clearly teaches that all revelation, especially biblical revelation, is an act of the entire Godhead – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and is therefore fundamentally, essentially, and

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131. Henry, 2.8.

132. Henry, 6.37.

133. Henry, 2.10.

134. Henry, 2.11.

135. Henry, 2.11.

136. Henry, 2.11.

137. Henry, 2.13.

comprehensively Trinitarian. It is within that basic framework that we can discuss the work of the Spirit in revelation.

Henry describes God's purpose in revealing himself to us at length in Thesis Two, "For Man's Benefit," to which he devotes two chapters.<sup>138</sup> He writes, "God's purpose in revelation is that we may know him personally as he is, may avail ourselves of his gracious forgiveness and offer of new life, may escape catastrophic judgment for our sins, and venture personal fellowship with him."<sup>139</sup> Even now, God through his revelation gives us a place in his divine kingdom.

In Volume Two, Chapter 3, "Not by Good Tidings Alone," Henry emphatically states that "Simply hearing God's revealed good news . . . does not redeem us automatically. . . . His gracious invitation to a life fit for eternity must be personally accepted; without personal appropriation God's promise of rescue in and of itself saves no one."<sup>140</sup> "God invites personal appropriation of revelational information that he has given us."<sup>141</sup>

Please remember these words.

## **2. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Revelation**

We shall first very briefly review the Spirit's work of inspiring the writers of the Bible, and then spend more time on his central role in the understanding and reception of the revelation of God. This will prepare us to respond to the criticism that Henry understates the role of the Spirit and exaggerates the role of human reason in the understanding and reception of God's truth.

### *A. Inspiration*

Henry discusses the role of the Holy Spirit in the inspiration of Scripture in Chapters 6–11 of Volume IV of *God, Revelation and Authority*. At some length, he treats "The Meaning of Inspiration," "The Inerrancy of Scripture," "The Meaning of Inerrancy," "The Infallibility of the Copies," and "The Meaning of Infallibility." Since the inspiration and consequent inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible are assumed by all members of the Evangelical Theological Society, I shall only note that, even in these chapters, Henry says, "Scripture is not of course savingly efficacious apart from the Spirit's bestowal of personal faith whereby the Bible becomes a means of personal grace."<sup>142</sup>

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138. Henry, 2.30-46.

139. Henry, 2.31.

140. Henry, 2.38.

141. Henry, 2.42.

142. Henry, 4.249.

Responding to those who confuse the reader's response with the intrinsic character of Scripture as revelation, he goes on:

Even where and when its readers and hearers are uncommitted to Christ and personally uninterested in salvation, the Bible infallibly fulfills an epistemic purpose. One need not be a believer to "get the message"; indeed, the Bible's message of rescue is particularly beamed towards doomed sinners. The spiritually given truth has intellectually enlightened many unregenerate persons about God's way of salvation, the face of divine creation, the consequences of sin, and the awesome final destiny of mankind.<sup>143</sup>

We shall not linger over this issue, but merely note that Henry believes the Scriptures as we have them to be the revelation of God to us in verbal form, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In Chapter 11, which serves as a bridge to Henry's exposition of the role of the Spirit in our understanding and reception, that is, our *appropriation* of Scripture, he responds to the conviction of Barth and others, including now some evangelicals, that "the true meaning of biblical inspiration is to be found in the church's belief-ful subjection to the Bible as the Word of God."<sup>144</sup> That is, with other evangelicals (until recently), he distinguishes "between the Spirit's original inspiration of chosen prophets and apostles from the Spirit's ongoing illumination of readers and hearers of that word."<sup>145</sup>

This is a crucial point, since it will bear upon the question of the role of the Spirit in our understanding of, and response to, the Word of God. Henry refused to confuse the distinction between the objective, divinely-given inspiration of the Scriptures and the subjective impact the Bible has upon readers and hearers. He wants to insist upon the quality of the Scriptures as Spirit-breathed words from God, regardless of how people may respond to them.

### *B. Illumination and Interpretation*

In Chapter 11, "The Spirit as Divine Illuminator," Henry argues that the Spirit's work of inspiration is confined to the inspiration of the writers of the Bible, and not to subsequent believers. He also insists that contemporary "revelation" by the Spirit is confined to illumination of the Scriptures and does not include direct revelation from God apart from the Scriptures.

Positively stated, Henry's view of the role of the Holy Spirit in our reception of the Bible is that "God intends that Scripture should function in our lives as his Spirit-illuminated Word. It is

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143. Henry, 4.250.

144. Henry, 4.258.

145. Henry, 4.259.

the Spirit who opens man's being to a *keen personal awareness* of God's revelation. The Spirit empowers us to *receive and appropriate* the Scriptures and promotes in us a normative theological comprehension for a transformed life. The Spirit gives a *vital current focus* to historical revelation and makes it *powerfully real*.<sup>146</sup>

This succinct statement contains a number of critical affirmations:

- (1) Our reception of the Bible as living truth is the result of the action of God: The Father wills it.
- (2) God intends that his Spirit-inspired Word function in our lives; it is not meant simply to present us with information.
- (3) The Spirit opens our entire "being to a keen personal awareness of God's revelation." Note the emphasis upon our being, and the use of the terms, "keen awareness" and "personal awareness." The Spirit makes us aware of God's revelation; this awareness is keen; and it is personal, not just coldly rational.
- (4) The Spirit empowers us to *receive and appropriate* the Scriptures: That is, he works on our will, not just our mind, so that we receive the Bible as God's Word and appropriate it; we take God's written revelation into our lives and make it our own.
- (5) The Spirit makes historical revelation vital to us and turns it into something not just distantly notional, but "real."

It is hard to see how Henry could have made himself clearer about the fact that the Holy Spirit plays the central and necessary role in our saving understanding and reception of Scripture.

Anticipating the charge that many make, that Henry grants too much ability to unaided human reason to understand and receive God's written Word, he says, "The ministry of the Spirit of God . . . is as essential and unique in enlivening God's revelation in the lives of his people as it is in the phenomena of divine incarnation and divine inspiration."<sup>147</sup> Why is this so? Because "[u]nregenerate nature fights to disavow its condition unmasked by its futile crucifixion of Jesus. . . . Veiling in comprehension stems . . . from the resistance and contradiction of the sinner. As the Spirit confutes the rebellious sinner, persuading him that God veritably speaks what the texts say, the beleaguered trespasser, who vacillates between two worlds yet senses that there is no secure shelter in vague promises of his own future virtue, concedes that only by accepting God's

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146. Henry, 4.273.

147. Henry, 4.277.

grace can he transcend his abject plight, and the gift of faith engenders repentance. The Spirit illumines Scripture, evokes trust in God, and regenerates contrite sinners.”<sup>148</sup>

In other words, the disastrous noetic effects of sin, which turn the wills of men and women away from God and his revelation, can only be overcome by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.<sup>149</sup>

That does not mean, as Barth and others since him have claimed, that apart from the Spirit’s work in us the Scriptures are not themselves the objective Word of God.

Nor does it mean that “without the perspective-transforming work of the Spirit one cannot understand the teaching of the Bible. The words that ‘God is Spirit’ and that ‘Christ died for our sins . . . and was buried, and rose again the third day’ are plain enough for anyone to comprehend at face value. The revelational truth conveyed by objective scriptural disclosure itself stipulates the need for subjective illumination and appropriation. But to make the fact of illumination and need of appropriation a reason for compromising the perspicuity of scriptural teaching is unjustifiable.”<sup>150</sup>

Henry criticizes Donald Bloesch and others like him who were influenced by Karl Barth and who distinguish between an “external” meaning of Scripture that can be understood even by unbelievers, and an “internal” meaning that is available only to believers. He counters: “For meaning is meaning, and attaches to logical propositions stated externally in print or verbally, or internally thought and either volitionally acted upon or disregarded. The test of whether one *personally believes* (italics original) the propositions to be true as a basis for action lies in one’s personal *appropriation or nonappropriation* (emphasis added) of them in daily life. But such appropriation or nonappropriation does not establish the truth or falsity, the meaningfulness or meaninglessness, of propositions.”<sup>151</sup>

Stated another way, “The Word of God is . . . not objectively inaccessible, but is conveyed in intelligible human speech, and its truth given in universally valid statements; it is not conditioned upon private decision or subjective response.”<sup>152</sup>

In other words, “The perspicuity of Scripture is sound doctrine. The Bible was – and is still – addressed to the multitudes, to masses of the poor, uneducated and even enslaved.”<sup>153</sup>

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148. Henry, 4.277-8.

149. On the noetic effects of sin, see, for example, Henry, *GRA*, 3.460.

150. Henry, 4.279.

151. Henry, 4.282.

152. Henry, 4.314.

153. Henry, 4.283.

### 3. Response to Criticisms of Henry's Doctrine of the Role of the Spirit in Revelation

In 2012, Michael D. White submitted a dissertation to Wheaton College titled, "Word and Spirit in the Theological Method of Carl Henry."<sup>154</sup> Written under the supervision of Kevin Vanhoozer, this dissertation has much to commend it. His own positive expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity, and his emphasis upon the inseparability of Word and Spirit in the revelation of God, stemming from the essential unity both of being and of activity of the three persons of the Trinity, are solid.

White has carefully read Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority* and has a genuine appreciation, it would seem, for some aspects of Henry's presentation. He has elsewhere written positively about Carl Henry's value as a biblical expositor.<sup>155</sup> He claims that his critique is a friendly, appreciative, iron-sharpening-iron attempt to correct some of the flaws in Henry's approach. We must take his words at face value here. On the other hand, as I tried to show in the previous essay on Henry and propositional revelation, I believe that White fundamentally misreads Henry and gives a very inaccurate impression of some aspects of Henry's teaching.

I have chosen to respond to his dissertation because it was written under the supervision of Kevin Vanhoozer, one of the most prominent theologians of our day, and White has told me that he favors his mentor's approach to these questions. He also explicitly contrasts Henry with Bernhard Ramm, whose position he and others like Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, prefer to that of Henry's.<sup>156</sup>

Let us hear what White says: "We argue that the root deficiency of Henry's method is an unintentional, functional separation of Word and Spirit evidenced by various features of Henry's approach."<sup>157</sup>

The principal concern related to Henry's concepts of Logos-lighting and the imago Dei is the *displacement* of the work of the Spirit in illuminating human hearts and making them receptive to divine revelation. On Henry's account, because humanity is Logos-lighted, it is capable of receiving and judging revelation – whether general or special. But there are good biblical and theological grounds for supposing rather that the ability to receive and *appropriate* revelation is due to the intervening activity of the Holy Spirit. . . . We will argue that the activity of the Spirit is required for humans to receive even general revelation properly. By *setting aside this requirement*, and by insisting *rather* that the Logos is the sole mediating agent of divine revelation, Henry implicitly separates Word

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154. Michael D. White, "Word and Spirit."

155. Michael D. White, "'Behold, the Lamb of God!'" 19-37.

156. Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 288-309. As I try to show in my *Carl Henry, Theologian for All Seasons*, Grenz and Olson also fundamentally misunderstand and misrepresent Henry's thought. See G. Wright Doyle, *Carl Henry: Theologian for All Seasons*, 92-129.

157. White, vi.

and Spirit. While general revelation is objectively given, unaided humanity is incapable of *appropriating* this revelation due to the crippling noetic and moral effects of the Fall. The extent of these effects, however, is the first point of departure between Henry and much of the Christian tradition.<sup>158</sup>

So, Henry is said to “displace” the work of the Spirit in illumination; to “set aside” the requirement of the activity of the Spirit in appropriating revelation; and somehow to ignore the noetic effects of sin upon our unaided ability to appropriate God’s revelation. “The problem is not a neglect of the Holy Spirit but a *fundamental misconception* about God’s manner in the work of revelation.”<sup>159</sup>

White avers that Henry fails to say that “to recognize the revelation of God aright is to receive the Word of God in one’s heart. This omission goes to the *very core* of Henry’s project: the God who speaks and shows does so in order that creatures might know and respond to him in faith.”<sup>160</sup> So, according to White, Henry does not teach that God reveals himself so that we might know him, and that this lies *at the core* of Henry’s theology.

White’s dissertation is replete with statements like this. I include some of them in the Appendix to this paper for your further reference.

For now, let me just conclude with five responses:

1. White has some good ideas about how Henry’s doctrine of revelation could be filled out in certain areas. If he had simply stuck to this, he would have made a solid contribution. He is correct that Henry could have said more about the mutual indwelling and inseparable activity of the three Persons of the Trinity (the concept of *perichoresis*), and the precise ways in which the Spirit works in illuminating the minds of those who read the Bible and causing them to receive God’s revelation with repentance, faith, and changed lives.

2. Nevertheless, his assertion that Henry’s doctrine of revelation does not flow from a rich view of the inseparable being and actions of the Trinity strikes me as very, very unfair.

3. His charge that Henry’s doctrine of revelation leads to a functional separation of Word and Spirit contradicts Henry’s explicit statements, which I have quoted above.

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158. White, 113. Emphasis added.

159. White, 186. Emphasis added.

160. White, 239.

4. His direct and indirect claims that Henry does not teach that the goal of revelation is for us to have communion with God and that the work of the Spirit is necessary for our appropriation God's revelation, are patently wrong, and constitute examples of what in my book on Carl Henry I termed, "evangelical slander."

5. Though in some places White calls for a distinction between *objective* truth of God's revelation in Scripture and the *subjective* reception of the revelation through the work of the Holy Spirit, at other points he himself fails to distinguish between the objective revelation of God in Scripture and our Spirit-generated subjective appropriation of that revelation. I do not understand this apparent contradiction in his own view, and personally believe that this is his fundamental error in understanding Henry.

Like so many others, White, it seems to me, has gone beyond legitimate critique and helpful suggestions for improvement to outright distortion of Henry's clear teaching. I hope this paper will encourage a more accurate assessment of Carl Henry's doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit in revelation, so that more people will be encouraged to avail themselves of the riches of *God, Revelation and Authority*.

## Appendix: Quotations from Michael White's dissertation:

He does not clearly define the distinctive contribution of the Spirit in illumination. Henry fails to elaborate the functional difference between aided and unaided reading, and in fact works as hard to minimize the distinction as he does to delineate it.<sup>161</sup>

While Henry is notionally committed to the unity of Word and Spirit, in spite of his best instincts, operationally he separates the two in his exposition of doctrine.<sup>162</sup>

In revelation no less than creation and redemption, God's whole activity is achieved by means of Word and Spirit.<sup>163</sup>

In our judgment this *telos* gets lost amidst the flurry of Carl Henry's strident insistence on the cognitive character of divine revelation. God's communicative economy is not less than a disclosure of propositional information, but it is certainly much more than this. Communication has communion as its ultimate end – a sharing not just of information about God, but rather a sharing of the splendor and fullness of God's own divine life. Redeemed creatures become "partakers of the divine nature," not substantially but communally through fellowship.<sup>164</sup>

Rather, the knowledge of God is God giving himself to be known, which includes objective content to be appropriated subjectively.<sup>165</sup>

We contend that Henry failed to locate revelation explicitly within the broader framework of Word and Spirit.<sup>166</sup>

Christians surely want to affirm that Holy Scripture *is* and *contains* the revelation of God within its pages. The risk this view runs, however, is the suggestion that revelation is fully received by all who merely open the container, with no further intervention of God.<sup>167</sup>

By contrast [to Islam], the Christian vision of revelation not only understands revelation to be progressive and crowned by the appearance of the Son of God, but also considers the regenerative work of the Spirit as necessary to fully receive the revelation of God.<sup>168</sup>

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161. White, 176.

162. White, 185.

163. White, 212.

164. White, 213. Note 69.

165. White, 215.

166. White, 229.

167. White, 231.

168. White, 232.

Henry is also careful to expound the Spirit's role in revelation, devoting lengthy and thorough treatments to the Spirit's activity. In no way, then, is it that Henry does not treat the persons of the Trinity in the communicative economy. Rather, it is the way in which he treats the persons that should be refined. This flaw is not fatal – there remains much to profit from in Henry's exposition of *God, Revelation and Authority* – but ultimately his engagement with the Trinity is merely tacit, and suffers deficiencies as a result.<sup>169</sup>

But even these two volumes are susceptible to Ramm's concern of an operative “abbreviated Protestant principle” which functionally neglects the Holy Spirit.<sup>170</sup>

In addition to the explicitly Trinitarian framework, the signal feature which distinguishes Ramm's approach to revelation *vis-à-vis* Carl Henry is the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, or what Ramm refers to as the “inner side” or “under side” of revelation.<sup>171</sup> More precisely, Ramm expounds the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum* – the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>172</sup>

As we consider Henry's approach alongside Ramm's, three contrasts emerge. First, Henry's doctrine of the Word is developed largely in isolation and segregation from the triune economy.<sup>173</sup>

Second, Henry develops the doctrine of Scripture almost entirely as a work of the Spirit.<sup>174</sup>

Finally, Henry does not sufficiently develop the necessary subjective work of the Spirit in creatures, namely regeneration and illumination, to permit the reception of divine revelation.<sup>175</sup>

This position generally maintains that the written Word alone is necessary to receive divine revelation, and it does so by erring at two points. First, the Word-accented approach first fails to recognize that the Word of God must be received by hearts that have been attuned by the Holy Spirit to receive divine revelation. In other words, it fails to perceive an essential connection between the triune communicative and redemptive economies.<sup>176</sup>

The problem is that Henry's explicit development offers ambiguous support for this specific work of the Spirit. Henry is clearly *sympathetic*, but his structure does not ultimately

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169. White, 234.

170. White, 234.

171. White, 114.

172. White, 236.

173. White, 236–7.

174. White, 237.

175. White, 237.

176. White, 238.

*require* this type of activity. This is because he insufficiently recognizes the extent to which triune communicative action is tied to the redemptive economy.<sup>177</sup>

Word-accented approaches – even those like Henry’s which are tacitly Trinitarian – too greatly estimate the written Word’s ability to be received by fallen creatures.<sup>178</sup>

Regrettably, Henry’s anthropology is non-operationally Trinitarian because it does not sufficiently situate creaturely knowledge of God within God’s (triune) communicative action. The Holy Spirit and the Word together deliver Christ, deriving from the same source (the Trinity) and agreeing in their substance (Christ and his benefits). But this knowledge of God comes only through repentance and faith, and even then relies upon the Spirit at every turn to grant wisdom and illumination. Only then may God’s speech be genuinely received and take root as sapiential knowledge.<sup>179</sup>

What results is a view of revelation which mainly consists of a set of static propositions inspired by the Spirit and inscripturated in the Christian Bible. While these propositions were the result of a coordinated work of the triune God, for Henry this involvement largely ceases after the production of the Scriptures is completed.<sup>180</sup>

Thus in his view, the personal knowledge of God purportedly achieved through encounter is identical to that of propositional revelation because personal knowledge consists in nothing other than the communication of cognizable information.<sup>181</sup>

Salvation is conditioned upon personally accepting and appropriating the truth of revelation. . . . The comprehension of revelation must therefore not be confused with the appropriation of salvation.<sup>182</sup>

We will argue that Henry undeveloped the subjective ministry of the Holy Spirit and that this weakness – though probably a reaction against neo-orthodoxy – is a concern which must be remedied if Henry’s theological method is to remain viable for evangelicals.<sup>183</sup>

Curiously, in Henry’s view, Scripture may mediate God’s presence, console grieving believers, and confront unbelievers in sin, but this happens without reference to the triune

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177. White, 239.

178. White, 240.

179. White, 92.

180. White, 147.

181. White, 137, Note 130.

182. Henry, *GRA* 2.45.

183. White, 14.

communicative economy. The Bible is a book that can be appropriated by believers and unbelievers alike without divine aid.<sup>184</sup>

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184. White, 152.

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