

Journal for Christian Theological Research

Volume 4

Article 3

1999

Beyond Evangelical Theology's Scholasticism and Pietism? A Review of *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World*, by Henry H. Knight III

James J. Buckley

Loyola College in Maryland, buckley@loyola.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr>

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buckley, James J. (1999) "Beyond Evangelical Theology's Scholasticism and Pietism? A Review of *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World*, by Henry H. Knight III," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol4/iss1999/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal for Christian Theological Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

James J. Buckley, "Beyond Evangelical Theology's Scholasticism and Pietism? A Review of *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World*, by Henry H. Knight III," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* [http://apu.edu/~CTR/Articles/1999_articles/buckley.html] 4:2 (1999).

BOOK REVIEW:

Beyond Evangelical Theology's Scholasticism and Pietism?**A Review of *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World*, by Henry H. Knight III**

[James J. Buckley](#)

Professor, Department of Theology
Loyola College in Maryland

1. Knight has a twofold aim: primarily, to offer a constructive proposal for a postmodern evangelical theology that upholds without compromise the truth of the gospel and, secondarily, to provide an entry into the thinkers and issues within evangelical theology (14 - 15). This evangelical (Roman) Catholic reader found himself instructed and edified on both scores. For purposes of an on-line review that will permit the author immediate response, I will not list the variety of ways I was instructed and edified. Instead I will move immediately to some issues for conversation and debate. First issue: The subtitle is, I think, a better clue to the book than the title, for the chapters amount to an initiation into a kind of post critical evangelical theology on a whole range of theological topics, not just or even primarily the issue of truth. Knight notes, at the very beginning, the now-standard triad of correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic theories of truth (p. 12). But the philosophical issues raised by such theories, along with related but distinct issues of the justification of truth (however defined) and the connections between truths (however justified) are not primary. This is (I think) a strength of the book, for reasons that will become clear-although those who give priority to theories of truth abstracted from our corporate existence as body of Christ will surely disagree. But my first question to the author is: am I right that the book is more about the sub-title than the title?

2. Part I characterizes Evangelicalism, following William Abraham, as sharing a family resemblance rather than a list of essentials or fundamentals. Knight himself describes evangelicalism as a movement out of Reformation Protestantism informed by both scholasticism and the pietist traditions, and beset by an internal tension between those who keep reason and experience separate and those who integrate the two (24). For Knight it is the pietist element in the evangelical family-the traditions of the awakenings-which holds the most promise for evangelicalism in a postmodern context (33). A persistent question I have for Knight's constructive proposal is whether reason and experience can be integrated within a pietist frame once they have been torn asunder in modernity. The form my question takes with regard to Part I is that a Catholic reader like myself, while grateful to be informed of the unity and diversity of evangelical theology, wonders why the story begins at the Reformation. Why not presume that the sudden or gradual development after the Reformations of scholastic and pietist strands are signs that something was deeply awry with the Reformations-or perhaps these Reformations were, even if necessary, not a sufficient response to early modern developments? (I hope this is not Catholic triumphalism, otherwise known as the abstraction Catholicism. I would include the Catholic Reformation of Trent among the Reformations here, which generated its own Catholic forms of scholasticism and pietism.).

3. Knight defends his reading of evangelicalism by bringing it to bear on a rich store of topics in the other three parts of the book, each with three chapters. The first part is on postmodernity and the truth of the Gospel. Here Knight sketches how liberal theology adopted modernity's epistemology, while the evangelical response was more ambiguous(41). One wing was and is apologetical (evidentialist like the Princeton theologians or presuppositional like Van Til, Clark, or Henry) and another wing Bloesch's fideistic revelationalism (49). Knight agrees more with Bloesch, in part, because the apologists concede too much to the very modernity they aim to resist (51). This, I think, is quite astute: the irony of the way resisters to modernity have unwittingly taken up its agenda cannot be told enough. But Knight's reasons for siding with the likes of Bloesch also have to do with the collapse of modern foundations in the likes of the great hermeneuticians of suspicion from Feuerbach through Foucault, Derrida, and Rorty as well as the post-critical critique of such suspicion in the likes of Wittgenstein, MacIntyre, and Polanyi. Knight is sympathetic to this post-critical critique. This makes one ask: is a fideistic revelationalism that appeals to the likes of Wittgenstein and MacIntyre simply another mirroring of modernity, this time not a propositionalist mirroring of the Enlightenment but a pietist mirroring of Romanticism? To know the answer to this question we would have to see more detailed comparison between evangelical theology and the likes of Wittgenstein and MacIntyre than Knight provides. Evangelical theology in a postmodern world is (I think) going to have to consider the objections of that postmodern world to evangelical theology more than Knight does here.

4. I do not want to be unfair on this point. Knight nicely insists that the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, known in the power of the Spirit, holds together the particularity modernity finds so offensive and the universality post-modernity suspects in ways that transcend both their agenda. It becomes clear in Part II (Revelation and the Truth of Scripture) that Knight aims less to directly criticize moderns or post moderns-and therefore less to consider their objections to evangelical theology-than he does to criticize evangelical propositionalism (here, Carl F. H. Henry) and mine narrative uses of Scripture (Frei, Fackre, Lindbeck, Stroup, etc.). We can see in this contrast of propositionalist and narrativist Christians a double of the contrast between scholasticism and pietism Knight previously mentioned. He is careful to defend the likes of Frei and Lindbeck against the charge that they backburner or ignore questions of the truth of narratives (106f) -- but he is just as careful to insist that the biblical narrative contains or implies certain propositions inescapably factual (110).

5. At this point we can see that Knight aims to re-integrate rather than perpetuate the scholastic-pietistic divide that he (persuasively) contends has characterized evangelical theology. This is, I think, all to the good. But at this point I am unclear about in exactly what the re-integration consists. Knight contends (for example) that [l]anguage of historical fact is necessarily inadequate and misleading when it attempts to account for the character and agency of God. (109). But he also contends that there are certain claims which the gospel makes that are inescapably factual, especially the resurrection (110). Is Knight re-integrating propositionalism and narrativism, or simply laying the truth of both side by side?

6. It could be that the last part of the book would be Knight's answer to this question. Part IV (Redemption and the Character of God) turns to the agency of God and the shape of the church. Using Thomas Tracy's *God, Action, and Embodiment*, Knight argues that it is the pattern of God's activity that reveals God's character (Chapter 8) and that it is on the basis of the character God has revealed that we identify God's actions today (Chapter 9)(139). He defends Clark Pinnock's freewill theism over against some of Donald Bloesch's criticisms (169 - 170). He endorses Pinnock because Pinnock is convinced of the Eastern Orthodox position on sin and grace, but he then goes on to suggest that Berkouwer and Wesley provide ways of holding together human agency and total corruption(170). We need to hear much more at this point about how all this fits together. For example, it seems to me that Eastern Orthodox (at least Greek and Russian) less have a position on sin and grace than a criticism of the way the need for a position even arises for Catholics and Protestants.

7. In the final chapter, Knight announces that the only evidence [for the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ] that will make a difference in a postmodern world is communities of people who in their life together and relationships to others manifest the life that was in Christ (p.180). The practical relations given as examples are pardon, holiness, and power (using language from the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal movements). I am not sure I would say the only evidence (what about Barth's contention that the existence of the Jewish people is a kind of evidence?), although this Catholic is delighted to find an Evangelical theology arguing for the evidentiary primacy of the community over all Christian individualisms. And the trialogue of Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal witness will be crucial to any future Christian internationale-more crucial than mainstream Protestant and Catholic theologies have yet recognized.

8. I have simply tried to raise some issues for discussion, not to offer a complete response to a book that covers lots of ground. I realize that, in raising some questions, I may have neglected other issues that provide responses to the very questions I raise. If so, I look forward to having this pointed out, even as I recommend this book's intelligence, passion, and clear evangelical faith.

