

A Trilogy of Theology

BY CHARLES C. RYRIE

THE CASE FOR THEOLOGY IN LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

BY L. HAROLD DE WOLF

THE CASE FOR A NEW REFORMATION THEOLOGY

BY WILLIAM HORDERN

THE CASE FOR ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

BY EDWARD JOHN CARNELL

"They are intended to provide for the lay person, student, teacher and minister a clear statement of three contemporary theological viewpoints by convinced adherents to these positions." Such is the stated purpose of a set of three books recently published by Westminster Press. *The Case for Orthodox Theology* is written by a professor and the former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, Edward John Carnell. *The Case for a New Reformation Theology* is authored by William Hordern of Garrett Biblical Institute, and *The Case for Theology in Liberal Perspective* is written by L. Harold De Wolf of Boston University. Thus orthodoxy, neo-orthodoxy, and neoliberalism are championed in this series by acknowledged representatives of each viewpoint.

One of the primary objects of any review is to judge how ably a book accomplishes the task it is supposed to do. In this instance that job has been clearly stated by the publisher. These books are supposed to present a clear statement of their respective viewpoints; that is, they are to be positive rather than negative (although it is recognized that any affirmative approach will include some defense). Comparing the three works on this basis, one feels that the case for neo-orthodoxy is the best presented and the case for neoliberalism runs second, chiefly because of its frequent use of *argumentum ad hominem*. It is not easy for a single author to state the viewpoint of a movement, but these two men have done their job well.

The tenets of *neo-orthodoxy* are well presented in Hordern's

volume. His discussion is able and his presentation clear. Central is the theme of God's revelation in the Word, Christ. He asserts that the Bible is an imperfect instrument pointing to the Word. Other typical ideas in neo-orthodoxy are included in the discussion. Paradox, so necessary to the system, is defended as entirely rational (p. 33). Tension, sin as self-centeredness, parable (in Genesis 3), and other familiar words in the Barthian vocabulary are used freely. Theological debate among fundamentalists is deplored (p. 57) but among Barthians is justified (p. 160). The good points in the idea of vicarious atonement should be maintained, according to the author, along with those in the ransom and moral influence theories, but such good points do not include expiation by blood. The author declares that this idea "comes more obviously from the Roman mystery cult of Mithra than from Christ" (p. 146). Atonement, yes; blood, no. Revelation in the Word, yes; in the Bible, no. Although the author claims that neo-orthodoxy is the true reformation theology, he clearly recognizes that it is not the same as orthodoxy. Would to God that all *orthodox* people would see as clearly.

Neoliberalism, a surging movement in this country, is also ably presented. The presentation is not always clear, nor can it be when one attempts to fill theological terms with unbiblical meanings. For instance, to the question, "What is authority?" comes the confusing answer "The authority of the word of God resides precisely in those teachings through which God speaks now to the living faith of the reader" (p. 56). More precisely this means that authority is what I want to be authoritative to me. This is not far from the subjectivism of neo-orthodoxy, and that is not surprising since both systems believe in a fallible Bible. The title *Son of God* means "perfect man in perfect Sonship to God" (p. 62). The author's doctrine of the Trinity is modalistic (p. 108), and substitutionary atonement through the blood of Christ is flatly rejected (p. 77).

Neoliberalism is little more than an attempt to give the old liberalism some respectability in light of today's theological atmosphere. Though there are basic differences between neoliberalism and the neo-orthodoxy, one is struck with

certain similarities when reading the two books together. Neoliberalism will likely be the issue around which battle lines will be drawn in the coming generation in America. It is rapidly gaining ground abroad, and if history repeats itself, America will shortly follow.

Running a poor third is *The Case for Orthodox Theology*. It fails in the purpose of the project of providing a clear statement of its position. It fails in what is not said in the book, and it fails in certain unorthodox statements which are made.

The book is supposed to give a clear statement of orthodoxy. One would expect it then to deal principally with the main stream of reformation theology. Instead the book very quickly degenerates into diatribes against the doctrines and practices of certain orthodox groups, particularly the one which the author is pleased to dub fundamentalism. Too, some of the traditionally held tenets of the main stream of orthodoxy are either sharply criticized or substantially weakened by implications which are suggested and questions which are raised but not answered. The book might be better entitled *The Critique of Orthodoxy*. (Indeed, Hordern has presented a fairer treatment of orthodoxy in his book, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*.) In view of the publisher's request, the author should be speaking primarily for the multitudes of the orthodox people of the world and only secondarily of any divergent views which he might personally hold. If the divergencies were too great, as sometimes they appear to be, then perhaps the assignment should have been declined. The book is a clear criticism but not a clear statement.

The work is woefully lacking in what is not said. If you as a reader of this review sat down to make a list of things which you would include in a statement of the orthodox case, what doctrines would you consider as basic to orthodoxy? Undoubtedly you would have on your list the doctrines pertaining to the Bible, to Christ's person, to Christ's work as minimally essential. You would, therefore, expect to find in this book solid treatments of inspiration, the virgin birth, the

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deity of Christ, His substitutionary atonement and resurrection.

While the author rightly defines orthodoxy as that branch of Christendom which limits the ground of religious authority to the Bible, his treatment of inspiration of the Bible is not always solid. Too many questions are left unanswered. While one would not imply that the author's Christology is unorthodox, yet the little attention that is paid to the virgin birth and the deity of Christ is evident by the fact that there is no listing for either in the index. Further, if one looks up the two references to atonement he will find one under a bibliographical section and the other under a criticism of dispensationalism. Perhaps this is not a fair way to judge a book, but when one finds in the index that there are separate listings for "cultic," "cultic conduct," "cultic mentality," "cultic mind," and "cultic thinking" (all referring to orthodox groups) one cannot help but feel that the author has been sidetracked from his main job. Even the resurrection of Christ receives scant attention. Except for incidental references, the discussion of this foundational truth is limited to two short paragraphs totaling less than half a page (p. 90). The book fails in what it does not say.

Furthermore, the book includes what the reviewer considers dangerously unorthodox statements. Concerning the question of the number of authors of Isaiah we are told that "a measure of Christian charity is needed at this point . . ." (p. 98). Passages which cannot be harmonized with the theology of Romans and Galatians fall "under the concept of progressive revelation" (p. 99). While the idea of progressive revelation is perfectly valid, early revelation must never be confused with "rude" revelation (as it is on p. 52) or used as implying misinformation and consequently error.

The evolution of man is apparently espoused by the author and considered orthodox. He states: "When orthodoxy takes inventory of its knowledge, it admits that it does not know *how* God formed man from the dust of the ground. The Genesis account implies an act of immediate creation, but the same account also implies that God made the world in six literal

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days; and since orthodoxy has given up the literal-day theory out of respect for geology, it would certainly forfeit no principle if it gave up the immediate-creation theory out of respect for paleontology. The two seem to be quite parallel . . . Scripture only requires us to say that the physical antecedent of man was not denoted *man* until God performed the miraculous act of divine inbreathing" (p. 95). In other words, he holds that the error of the evolutionists is that they have misnamed the antecedents of man because they chose to call them certain types of men.

Fundamentalism comes in for a very severe beating in this book. Whatever one may deplore in slanted doctrines and practices of *some* fundamentalists, it must be admitted that fundamentalists are orthodox. Dispensationalism is particularly abused, but again, it should be recognized that of all fundamentalists, dispensationalists are uniformly orthodox. Therefore, it is difficult to see what place such harsh criticism has in a book that purports to *defend* orthodoxy but which in reality turns right around and slaps in the face one of the largest groups of orthodox people. That has all the earmarks of biting the hand that feeds it. Even J. Gresham Machen comes in for three pages of criticism of his actions in relation to the Presbyterian church. Baptists, perfectionists, and others are also maltreated until one wonders what orthodox people are left. The author's favorite word to describe anyone who disagrees with his own brand of so-called orthodoxy is "cultic." That is, any group that does not meet his qualifications has gone cultic. So predominate is this approach that one wonders if it is not the author who is cultic.

The reviewer was greatly disturbed too by the spirit of the book. One readily admits that there are inconsistent practices in fundamentalism, but this is no reason for washing dirty linen in public, particularly when it is the linen of brethren and the washing is done in a context that is supposed to defend the doctrine of those brethren. Further, this is done by using the most bitter kind of sarcasm. Smoking and movies, for instance, receive more attention than the virgin birth and the kind of attention which labels even the person who in all good

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conscience avoids these things a hypocrite, coward, legalist, and cultist. After a particularly abusive harangue against such people the author says: "Paul says we are to 'avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men' (Titus 3:3)" (p. 121). In the process of making these attacks the clear impression is left (certainly in the discussion of dancing, p. 124) that believers ought to indulge in all these things in order to cultivate their spiritual lives since avoidance is ruining them. To turn the author's own terminology on himself, one has the feeling that he upholds evolutionary science and approves dancing in order not to lose his status in his own cult.

Although there are good sections in the book (the treatment of Romans for the most part, and the hermeneutical discussion) the work has to be judged as a whole in respect to the total impression it leaves as to the validity of the case for orthodoxy. And judging it on this basis it leaves much to be desired. One fears that harm has been done to our cause and a rare opportunity to reach people by-passed by personal animadversions.