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A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship (TSF) Bulletin (US)* can be found here:

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# TSE BULLETIN

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<b>Introducing This Issue</b> <i>Vernon Grounds</i>	3
<b>The Vocation of the Theologian</b> <i>Robert K. Johnston</i>	4
<b>From Truth to Authority to Responsibility: The Shifting Focus of Evangelical Hermeneutics, 1915-1986 (Part I)</b> <i>Douglas Jacobsen</i>	8
<b>An Interview With Carl F.H. Henry</b> <i>Diana Hochstedt Butler</i>	16
<b>The Authority and Role of Scripture (1981-1986): A Selected Bibliography</b> <i>Donald K. McKim</i>	19
<b>Sexuality, Hierarchy and Evangelicalism</b> <i>Kathleen E. Corley and Karen J. Torjesen</i>	23
<b>Carl Henry on Hierarchy</b>	25
<b>Japanese Christians and the Yasukuni Shrine Issue</b> <i>Yoshiaki Yui</i>	27
<b>The Pain of the North American Heart: Reflections on A Recent Ecumenical Student Gathering</b> <i>Donald Persons</i>	29
<b>The Kairos Convocation</b> <i>Wilma Jakobsen</i>	31
<b>Bibliography: Books on South Africa</b> <i>Kathy O'Reilly</i>	33
<b>The Voice of Outsiders: Is Anybody Listening?</b> <i>William Dyrness</i>	34
<b>Book Reviews and Comments</b>	34

A Publication of  
**THEOLOGICAL  
STUDENTS  
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# An Interview with Carl F.H. Henry

by Diana Hochstedt Butler

*When Publisher's Weekly reviewed Carl Henry's Confessions of a Theologian, they called Henry "The Angelic Doctor: the Thomas Aquinas of the Evangelical World." Although some might consider the comparison dubious, by all counts Carl Henry is the elder statesman of American evangelicalism. He was converted to Christianity in 1933—just past the height of the Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy—and his autobiography reads like a personal history of modern Christianity. Over the course of fifty years, Henry met and talked with many great theologians, traveled the world and was embroiled in many controversies. His personal knowledge of contemporary Christianity is unmatched; his imprint on modern evangelicalism is undeniable.*

*On a cold Saturday morning in January, my husband and I met Carl Henry in his Arlington, Virginia home. He was standing at the door waiting for us. He quickly ushered us in from the morning chill. He introduced us to his wife, Helga, who, unfortunately, could not stay with us that morning. They walked us through a cozy and old-fashioned living room with over-stuffed chairs and lots of photographs (passing by the largest pile of Christmas cards I've ever seen in a private home!) to the dining room. We sat down, fortified by coffee and Helga's wonderful German cookies, to talk about theology, evangelicalism, and Henry's life.*

*Sensing my nervousness, Carl Henry was gracious and reassuring. In some ways, it was more of a conversation than an interview! He was interested in our views, convictions and life stories as we were in his. There was much laughter throughout our serious and thought-provoking discussion.*

*As we drove back to Boston, I felt encouraged by the discussion. But it was not simply a discussion about theology. We had talked of God in an urgent and personal way, a way which affected us and could affect the world.*

*There is much I'll remember from that morning, but the comment I'll remember most came at the very end. I expressed some frustration about a controversial issue I tackle at times. Dr. Henry asked me my opinion on the subject. I told him where I stood, that I thought it was scriptural and no argument had convinced me differently. He looked straight at me and said, "Don't be pushed around. Stick to the Bible and maintain your integrity."*

*That is what Carl Henry wants to say to us all.*

**TSFB:** The title of the commencement address you delivered last spring at Westminster Seminary, "Are Theologians an Endangered Species?" is intriguing. Are theologians an endangered species?

**Henry:** Well, it depends what you mean by a theologian. Every last human being has a concept of God, shoddy as it may be. So you have Buddhist theologians, Hindu theologians and so on. Or you could mean the term as specifically Christian: those who are skilled in theology. More technically, those who are teachers of theology as a specific vocational calling.

Theologians were an endangered species in Jesus' time, when people tended to supply their own interpretation of the Law and miscarried it. And they are endangered in modern times also. Not only because they are answerable to Scripture, but because of the tendency of secular society to look upon theology as not simply obtuse but as superstitious and myst-

ical. Society views theology as essentially subjective; everybody rolls his own. One theology becomes as legitimate or illegitimate as another.

**TSFB:** You touch on that in the essays in your two recent books, *The Christian Mindset* and *Christian Countermoves*. Is part of your agenda for evangelicalism to get evangelicals to start *thinking* about themselves?

**C.H.:** This is one of the great weaknesses of our time: that intellectuals are critical of contemporary society, but the masses are contemptuous of intellectuals! In point of fact, the media age has raised up a new category of intellectual. The intellectual no longer has to wait for reviews of his book by peers who judge the value or merit of a work. Upon publication, he or she is rushed to the media for interviews, and interviewed by people who are not specialists in the field. They are usually interested in certain facets—what touches lower emotions rather than what touches the essence of critical thought. The media themselves therefore propagate a redefinition of the intellectual. The intellectual has become anybody who can turn a smart phrase—particularly about things that the masses are interested in. And it's done in such a way as to provide a dynamic media interview of it.

Take authors who are interviewed—most often they are chosen when their books make radical claims that have not been verified by the scholarly community. My conviction is that an intellectual is first someone who knows the history of ideas, and who knows the strengths and weaknesses of positions asserted in the history of thought; knows that we live upon the past and that not everything is ideal because it's modern. That is especially true of modern thought. On the other hand, I don't think an intellectual is merely a collector of traditions, a curator of diverse philosophical views inherited from the past—though what is past can often be superior to the present, particularly if the scholarship of the past found a basis for assertions rising above the idea that ideas are culture conditioned. The intellectual makes a case for the permanent validity of truth and morality. That sort of intellectual framework provides a basis for the survival of one's idea into the future. In the biblical context, it is the fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom. In the long history of thought, both Western and Eastern philosophers have been more on the side of God and the supernatural. The great religions of the world tend to be theistic and pantheistic. Theism, or a form of theism, is far more prominent throughout history than the naturalism which has dominated contemporary thought. This question is permanently on the agenda: How to make a case that God makes for himself.

**TSFB:** Everything you are saying runs against the stream of modern Christianity and especially modern evangelicalism. Do you think evangelicals have gone about making a case for God through their *experience*, instead of what they think?

**C.H.:** The valid point in that approach is *if* one has no experience of thought, then it is an experientially insignificant notion. God is experientially an insignificant notion. It's mere redundancy to say I have no experience of God unless I experience him. That is so elemental it is hardly worth affirming. The real question is what is the source of true knowledge of God. In modern thought, including much evangelical thought, a case for theism is mounted on the basis of the not-God. The appeal is made either from man's experience, which is cer-

tainly the not-God. The appeal is made either from man's experience, which is certainly the not-God, from nature, from the movements of history, inevitable progress, conscience and so on. My conviction is that it's impossible to rise to God from the not-God. There's always something wrong with the argument. That puts me over against Thomas Aquinas.

**TSFB:** You stand with Karl Barth on that one.

**C.H.:** Yes. Only because Barth stood with Augustine and beyond him, with Paul and Isaiah and Moses. We need to begin with God's self-revelation. I break with Barth in my insistence that God's personal revelation is intellectual, cognitive and that God builds truths about himself in revealing himself. That's the great difference. Barth, the early Barth, says that revelation is nonpropositional and noncognitive. God confronts the will in man's decision.

There is a great deal of emphasis on decision in contemporary evangelical thought. We are only now beginning to catch up with the fact that even in mass meetings the call for decision gets a response far greater than the number of deciders who actually survive or affiliate with an evangelical church. Recent estimates have put the figure of casualties in the ninety percent range.

**TSFB:** Given all you've just said, what areas of theology are the most important for young evangelical scholars to be working on today?

**C.H.:** First, the doctrine of God. If one discards God, then nature is no longer relativized. All sorts of theories of the causal network of nature that holds man in his grasp, or an indeterministic nature that makes the future wholly unpredictable, or sheer evolutionary nature that supercedes anything that arises in the past or in the present—all those theories gain headway if God is discarded and nature is no longer relativized. Again, if one lets go of God, man is no longer relativized. You get totalitarian views that man himself defines the content of human rights, man himself determines the nature of truth and the nature of good. The latter is an echo of contemporary humanism. We don't confirm the reality of God simply because of what the negation of God makes possible. That's a completely ridiculous thought. God is important because he revealed himself and reveals himself still. He's revealed himself in nature, history, conscience and the mind of man, the *imago Dei*. He's revealed himself specially in the Hebrew Christian history and the Scriptural interpretation of that history. He reveals himself ongoingly in Jesus Christ's universal revelation. He still speaks in and through Scripture.

Evangelical theology tends to treat the doctrine of God devotionally. That in itself is certainly not to be disparaged—but it does so to the neglect of the intellectual significance of the doctrine in the contemporary conflict of ideas. Even in the tendency to treat God only devotionally, most evangelical worship tends to be quite thin. Compare some of the Puritans and their writings with contemporary prayers and there's a day and night difference between them. People live with a very thin view of God, a very skimpy view of God. That is why when they run into serious trouble, they buckle so easily. Surely that "fluffy" view of God is not unrelated to the breakdown of faith that issues often in divorce and marital separation and sometimes even suicide in evangelical circles.

**TSFB:** This is a problem for evangelicalism as a whole; there are many in my generation who grew up within evangelicalism who want nothing more to do with it. People aren't taught who God is in their churches. Many young evangelicals are saying that the worship is feeble, the thinking is feeble. And they think the whole tradition is unrescuable.

**C.H.:** A lot of it is. Even in its present pulpit presentation, a lot of contemporary evangelicalism is doctrinally very thin.

Too much evangelical preaching fails to bring forward into the present the immense importance of biblical revelation. It has to its credit the fact that it is biblically rooted and it presents the revelation of God in its biblical context, but it too often fails to bring forward into the *present* the implication of that biblical content. That probably is the weakness of evangelical preaching. The modernists dwell in the present. They are weak in trying to find anchorage for their ideas back in the biblical soil. We need to focus on evangelism, but we need to take a critical look at evangelism that preaches what happened in the biblical past, and then make an almost Bultmannian turn in the closing one or two minutes and ask that it be appropriated in an internal decision alone—without realizing that what happened in the past has significance for contemporary history. That means we don't stop with the doctrine of God—we go on to the doctrine of creation. It is remarkable that people who go first to John 3:16 forget how much John said about the doctrine of creation in John 1—before he even got around to the doctrine of salvation.

**TSFB:** In the forties when you, along with others, were frustrated with fundamentalism, you came up with this new term—"evangelicalism"—to describe yourselves.

**C.H.:** I've always resisted the term "evangelicalism." Evangelical is good enough for me. I do think, however, the diversity of evangelicals in our time gives an increasing legitimacy for the term evangelicalism. I've always felt that an "ism" was destined to be a "wasm." We are seeing a mish-mash in evangelicalism today. It is encouraged by the evangelical establishment. Whether you think of evangelical crusades or leading magazines, they *try* to reflect as much of the mix as possible. They do not give any critical evaluation of it. Of course, attendance at crusades and the support for the electronic church and the potential subscribers to magazines is tied up with getting the largest response possible. If you are an evangelical you ought to get on the boat with all of us.

What has happened is a lack of responsible criticism of the evangelical movement from its own leaders. That can be done in love. One of the things about *Christianity Today* (when it started) that drew the interest of nonevangelicals was that it contained self-criticism of the movement. Too much of contemporary evangelicalism acts as if it is unqualifiedly normative. Any criticism becomes a betrayal of the cause. For example, when *Newsweek* came out with the cover story on the "Year of the Evangelical" many evangelicals were saying that the last great evangelical awakening had come. That was no more a tribute to evangelical awakening than the man in the moon. Evangelical awakening is here when the world starts judging itself by an evangelical conscience—even though it won't commit itself to evangelical beliefs. That isn't happening. We are far from that today.

**TSF:** If you would have stayed with *CT*, is that where you would have wanted to go? To support the evangelical movement by both undergirding it theologically and criticizing it fairly?

**Henry:** Indeed. I had an agreement from Billy Graham that we could even speak critically of his evangelistic meetings. He said he hoped I wouldn't feel compelled to do that all the time!

**TSF:** Does that lack of ability to look at the movement honestly betray some sort of theological problem within evangelicalism?

**Henry:** I think so. We are shying away from repentance—and that is the road to renewal. The big question before evangelicals is whether they are going to find a deeper reliance on God and put his claim upon them. I feel that way. I'm ready to plunge in. Frankly, I don't look hopefully on the Reformed

movement, the Arminian movement of the Wesleyans, or the Pentecostals as an alternative to the Evangelical movement. All of this indicates that we have not found unity. We may have found a unity which is superior in some respects to the ecumenical movements, but for evangelicals it's going to take a deeper commitment which involves taking more seriously the doctrine of the church than has been taken in evangelical circles.

to do one article—it should be placed squarely in the midst of one of the best intellectual journals today.

The right authors and issues would have to be joined. It's not so much *who* I'd have as *what* they say. I'm impressed by a good number of writers today, but what is lacking is the strategy, the organizational strategy, that presents them as a cohesive movement assailing the right fortresses. What's lacking is a schematic overview and integration of these efforts.

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*I do not regard socialism as a benevolent and altruistic alternative—especially now that the empirical data is in. One would think that those who profess to be intellectually oriented would at least begin to evaluate some of the data!*

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**TSF:** If *CT* called you up and asked you to be editor, what issues would you tackle? Who would you have writing for you?

**Henry:** If I got that call, I would think I was having a bad dream! I would do precisely what I suggested to the meeting in Palm Springs of evangelical leaders who were contemplating "passing the torch" to the younger generation: We need an overall strategy that looks at where we are as American evangelicals in the world, what the problems and barriers are, what resources we have for doing something and how they can be most effectively meshed to the need—so that we can do maximally what we have some promise of doing.

I don't mean simply to suggest a strategy of activism. I include in this the need for reviving the prayer meeting, probing a deeper spirit of worship, and stressing a profounder role for Scripture and its bearing upon contemporary society—all of it. The last forty pages of my autobiography gives an agenda. The remarkable thing is that while I was in Asia, I had American pastors ferret me out and say that chapter so gripped them that they wanted their churches to be pilot projects for that sort of thrusting into the future. So there is an agenda. I think *Christianity Today* has its distinctive ministry today. It is venturing the somewhat impossible task of trying to minister on two fronts, one which is very popular and the other which is cognitive. The tragedy would be if those two do not coincide in their commitment and interest.

**TSFB:** Which they obviously seem not to—judging from the pages of the magazine.

**C.H.:** That's true. We had 170,000 paid subscriptions in those days, predominantly pastors and seminarians. Today they have about 212,000, but they've lost the intellectuals. It's too bad. And, ironically, *Christian Century* has become more conservative.

**TSFB:** Should evangelicals start a new journal for their concerns to be voiced? Or has our society become so obsessed with visual media that a journal would no longer have the kind of impact it had in the 1950s?

**C.H.:** If that comes about, it ought to come about through *all* the seminaries and the Christian colleges doing it together. We have some good journals today. We have the *Westminster Journal*, the *Trinity Journal*, the *ETS Journal*. But if we had one great journal, there would be a chance of it being read. Another idea would be to have a committee and pick out the people who have ability and place their key articles on key issues right into existing secular nonevangelical journals, then present an award publicly every year for the best article. That's one alternative we haven't thought about. Why start another journal? Wouldn't it be just as effective to have a review committee that venture assignments and make commitments with funds? Even if a professor had to take off a two-hour course

They all run around like lonely cowboys at a rodeo lassoing this or that loose cow or bull on the horizon.

**TSFB:** Is that kind of cooperation possible with the diversity in evangelicalism today?

**C.H.:** I don't know. Only God knows the answer to that question. Evangelical Christianity may have squandered its opportunity. I don't mean that it will perish, but I'm talking about the opportunity that it had. F.F. Bruce says that the evangelical movement was at its strongest when *Christianity Today* gave it theological leadership. What made evangelical Christianity strong in the contemporary context was the alliance between Graham's evangelism and *Christianity Today*. Graham penetrated across lines into the ecumenical denominations and carried evangelism out of the fundamentalist arena to what was then the mainstream. *CT* carried evangelical beliefs out of the independent arena. It showed there was an international, interdenominational evangelical scholarship. We have allowed that advantage to slip away.

Despite all the claims of the electronic church and despite all the effort of the Moral Majority and the evangelical engagement in the public arena, evangelicals within four or five years may well be back where they started from as a public influence. The Falwell effort to bring about a coalescence between fundamentalists and evangelicals has reached a dead-end, I think. The acceleration of naturalism, or raw paganism, on the American scene is proceeding at an astonishing rate. There is a gratifying evangelical remnant—though it often thinks of itself as much more than a remnant—and we can be grateful for that. But I think the humanism is quickly going out of Humanism and that unless there is an evangelical renewal, in the 1990s we will see a relapse of humanism to paganism, to sheer pagan naturalism—that is what the church will face.

**TSFB:** That makes me uncomfortable.

**C.H.:** It did not make the apostles uncomfortable. They continually said God, Christ, the Lord of history, could return right now and wind the whole thing up for judgement. In that context, they found boldness under God. That was the key to their boldness, the key to their wisdom, the key to their peace, the key to everything they had was the fullness of the Spirit in their lives. They lived in two worlds. They lived in the other world as the ultimately real world and, secondly, this world as the world of contemporary opportunity.

**TSFB:** That kind of bold eschatology can give us hope. Would a clear biblical eschatology empower the church?

**C.H.:** It would be a great help, but I wouldn't go on eschatology alone. I would center it on the doctrine of God. Then on the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of redemption and eventually the doctrine of future judgment. Of course, the future judgment is already underway because Christ is even

now judging the nations.

**TSFB:** I'd like to ask you some questions about your autobiography. I must confess that the last chapter moved me, too. Was part of your purpose in writing it to "pass the torch" on to the next generation of evangelical leadership?

**C.H.:** I have never felt that. One thing about that meeting in Palm Springs—with leaders gathered to pass the torch—bothered me. I ask myself, "Is this a way of perpetuating your centrality and leadership and passing on the torch? Were they passing it on to people whose hands were really out? Are these the people who are going to receive it?" I think that's a great deal of presumptuousness. God called me when I was a pagan. He works that way. Solzhenitsyn did not come to Christianity from an evangelical context. C.S. Lewis didn't come to us out of the evangelical movement. They were both gifts from God. Chuck Colson didn't come out of the evangelical movement. We are so confident about passing the torch within; maybe God has a torch to pass to somebody who is without. Somebody who can really speak in an uninhibited way as not simply a critic, but as one whose work and witness to God is such a blessing that people have to listen. That is often a factor in the renewal of the Christian community.

**TSFB:** So you weren't purposefully passing the torch, yet you do not refrain from giving an agenda. You said in the preface that you were reluctant to write an autobiography. Why?

**C.H.:** In part because my conversion was in the context of the Oxford Group. They were often charged by critics as engaging in a recital of their sins. And I've lived through part of an evangelical era in which people turn their liabilities into promotional assets: "How God saved me from twenty years as a drug addict" . . . that sort of thing. One wonders whether the drugs get more publicity than the Divine. I've always been reticent to talk about myself. I'd rather talk about ideas than about myself. I may not seem that way. I guess an ex-newspaperman does not talk about himself but the world around him.

**TSFB:** The title, *Confessions of a Theologian*, immediately made me think of Augustine's *Confessions*.

**C.H.:** Yes. That was intended. It was dual entendre: confession in the sense of disclosure and a confession of faith in God.

**TSFB:** But you never expressed the kind of doubt and intellectual torture that Augustine went through. You seem so confident. Were you personally affected by the winds of twentieth century theology?

**C.H.:** I wrestled them deliberately in university. I don't often speak about that. I deliberately searched out problems and certainly put myself through intellectual doubts as part of that procedure. But I must say that Christ has been real to me in a vital way ever since June 1933. It was just a blinding experience. I know he is real. He's alive and he is the Risen One. I've never, even in the most serious crises of life, doubted

that.

**TSFB:** So many people have struggles with believing the right things about God. Have you ever felt pulled toward a different theological outlook?

**C.H.:** I've walked the world and have seen the masses in their poverty. I've had to ask whether the "isms," the ideologies, are really the benevolent alternative. I'm critical. I'm a critic of American society, the "freestyle," the free living lifestyle of America, and its injustices.

But I disagree with left-leaning criticism at a number of points. First, I do not regard socialism as a benevolent and altruistic alternative—especially *now* that the empirical data is in. One would think that those who profess to be intellectually oriented would at least begin to evaluate some of the data! Second, I do not share the view that the West is the worst of all alternatives. The emphasis on self-determination that survives in the free world is far superior to the totalitarian bureaucracy and controls that are characteristic of the communist oriented nations. Third, most of the social criticism of our time evades the central issue of an objective spiritual and moral order. Hence, it can offer no alternatives to the present situation that escapes ideologies which supply a false meaning and hope for human life.

In these three respects I put myself over against the Left, but surely I share the view of the deterioration of American culture. When politicians say that we essentially are a good people, they either have a questionable view of human nature or they look at the intentions of the best segments of American society and confuse them with the mindset and willset of the whole populace.

**TSFB:** What would you say to a seminary student who was struggling with the theological options?

**C.H.:** Understand them, so that you fully understand what is involved. See through them. And do this in the light of the biblical view of man. This is a tremendous corrective. The belief in the inevitability of progress and the essential goodness of man encourage one to take an uncritical view of the bureaucracies of the totalitarian movements. Remember that Karl Barth, who studied under Harnack and classic liberalism, was astonished one day when he opened the German papers and found that Harnack and others had signed the statements hailing the Kaiser's dream of *Deutschland uber Alles*. They did it because of their optimistic view of nature and history. Barth, having read the Epistle to the Romans, was horrified to discover this. Go back and read Romans. It made a difference to Augustine. It made a difference to Luther.

**TSFB:** And to Edwards and Wesley.

**C.H.:** And it made a difference to Barth. God is still waiting for it to make a difference in the lives of others in contemporary society.

# The Authority and Role of Scripture (1981-1986): A Selected Bibliography

by Donald K. McKim

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*Donald K. McKim is no stranger to anybody working to understand evangelical hermeneutics and related views of Scripture. TSF Bulletin is pleased to provide a new bibliography which will guide many through the raging currents of this important discussion. This bibliography updates an earlier bibliography which can still be ordered from TSF Research.*

## SCRIPTURE

### A. BIBLICAL DATA

Barr, James. *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983.