Wonder And The Revitalization Of Evangelical Theology

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t is well-known that over the course of the past few centuries evangelical systematic theology has suffered much at the hands of secularization. It pains us to admit that it has been marginalized and has lost its place as a significant determinant of cultural values and views. But recently matters have become, if anything, even more serious. Within the evangelical community itself, systematic theology is now commonly regarded as dangerous to the life of the soul, or at best quite irrelevant to the interests of the church. And so evangelical interests in worship and spirituality, for example, often proceed as though theology was precisely that: irrelevant. Unfortunately, this attitude is not restricted to the uninformed. There are well-educated Christian leaders who gnash their teeth at the very word "theology," and go berserk when the adjective "systematic" is added. I know, for I have seen evangelical scholars in other disciplines go redfaced, and come dangerously close to losing all vestiges of sanctification, at the mere mention of this subject area.

All of this ought to be quite disconcerting to us, for by its simplest definition evangelical systematic theology is serious study which has as its aim an overall grasp of biblical truth and its application to life. The church desperately needs to be guided on its hazardous voyage by the sure rudder of truth. On all sides we see signs of confusion and instability. For the sake of Christ's kingdom, we desire that evangelical systematic theology be reinstated at the centre of the intellectual life of the church.

Nonetheless, for this to happen there also needs to be a renewal of evangelical systematic theology and the intrinsic quality of its enterprise. Echoing a famous nineteenth century judgment on Christianity, we can say that at the present time two things about evangelical theology must surely be clear to anyone with eyes in his head. One is, that men cannot do without it; the other, that they cannot do with it as it is. The thesis of this article is that the evangelical theological enterprise could be revitalized through an infusion of a spirit of wonder.

The Nature of Wonder

nasmuch as this is an apology for wonder, it is important that we proceed on the basis of a clear understanding of it. At the popular level, to wonder is to doubt or to be uncertain, or worse yet, to be in a complacent, pasty-faced, mind-numbed fog. It is not surprising then, given the prevalence of such a notion, that to suggest any profitable alliance between wonder and theology sounds flaky.

But the wonder that I am advocating is quite another matter. First of all, wonder is a response of amazement, triggered by something unexpected and mysterious. When we unpack this experience of amazement, we find that it contains elements of both surprise (hence our word "wonder-struck") and puzzlement. It contains surprise because the cause of our wonder is so unanticipated. It puzzles us, or throws us into mental confusion, because what we experience comes without explanation or recognizable harmony with our previous knowledge.²

This is not the end of the matter, however, for immediately other dynamics come into play. The experience of wonder is always an ambivalent one, for the wonderer (if we can call her that) has two contradictory reactions: a longing for novelty and a fear of the unknown. Objects of wonder (that is,

wonder-stimulating things) thus simultaneously attract and repel us.

Now let us assume for a moment that the longfor novelty, the power of attraction, predominates. In such a case, the initial wonder takes on the hue of admiration. Now the wonderer finds herself feeling both the original puzzlement and this subsequent admiration. Both are pregnant with possibilities. Puzzlement leads on naturally to curiosity and the quest for explanation, and admiration leads on to contemplation. And by contemplation we do not mean mindless languor, but an inner receptivity, a disciplined silence, an attentive listening. When wonder is sustained, these things can and should lead eventually to celebration, where we allow ourselves to enjoy in an uninhibited way that which has been given to us so unexpectedly and inexplicably. All this can and should occur when the longing for novelty is allowed to express itself.

But as we said, wonderstruck individuals also carry within themselves the fear of the unknown. Out of a need for security and stability, the wonderer may very possibly choose to nip the dangerous thing in the bud, and suppress the spirit of wonder at the outset. The status quo will be maintained. But the abortion of wonder robs such an individual of the deeper experiences of investigative adventure, admiration, contemplation and celebration. Sadly, it would seem that the habit of suppression can become so entrenched that even the involuntary first moments of surprise and puzzlement become fewer and farther between.

It is especially important to note that wonder, as we have described it, incorporates both openness to novelty and stimulation of critical inquiry. On the one hand, it prevents us from suppressing the novelty which we cannot fully understand or control. On the other, it immediately moves us beyond blank acceptance, beyond the shrug of boredom, to seek deeper apprehension. Wonder is the marvelous middle-way between scepticism and credulity. It was the wisdom of the early church to put a fence around the mysteries of the faith. It is wisdom for us neither to trample down the fences, nor to walk away from them. To extend the metaphor, we ought always to be bent over and peering through the slats.

Finally, I would like to point out how basic humility is to wonder. Wonder is in fact the antithesis of hubris (or pride). It is opposed to the passion to control and to stand in judgment over the world. Wonder involves a tacit concession that there is a profound reality over and against us, which exceeds our capacity to master it, and which must be accepted on its own terms and allowed to speak for itself. The true wonderer is always the marvelling learner. And in her quest for understanding, she is instinctively unwilling to absolutize any of the tentative conclusions she may have drawn from her own experience to date. Unfettered by pride, the wonderer is truly open to the world.

Such an attitude certainly does not come easily to a theologian. One might even say that it is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. The reason for the difficulty, I believe, is that integration is the heart of systematic theology. In this discipline which we perhaps self-indulgently and nostalgically call the queen of the sciences, we seek to bring together in a coherent and selfconsistent whole the truth which is served up piecemeal by the various supportive disciplines. This is very important, but heady stuff too, and extremely well-suited to nurturing hubris in the theologian. Often we dream like Joseph that all the brothers were predestined to bow down to us. We vainly dream, moreover, that all truth must surrender to our conceptual understanding. Straining for a coherent and comprehensive vision of truth, theologians are not naturally inclined to develop the humility which is so vital to a spirit of wonder.

Antidote to Scepticism

here are a number of benefits which can come to evangelical theology, and through that theology to the church, through the infusion of a spirit of wonder. Actually, the word "benefits" understates the matter, for the results we have in mind are essential to evangelical theology's survival. The first of these is that wonder can serve as an antidote to scepticism.

Evangelical theology, as practised for some time, tends to be cannibalistic. Ironically, evangelical theologians all too often devour that which we are ostensibly trying to preserve and proclaim. You may feel that this Campolo-style remark is unfair. We evangelical theologians are sincere people who pray about our work. We are defenders of the faith, not its enemies.

The fact is, though, that a lot of lay believers

suspect otherwise. It is true that some such suspicions stem from insecure ignorance, and it requires charity to deal with such brethren and their plots. But the German theologian Helmut Thielicke of Berlin has challenged us to view some such complaints as expressions of "the spiritual instinct of the children of God." We must not dismiss out of hand the possibility that some of the relatively uneducated laypersons who harass us are, from time to time, on to something. They think the faith is endangered in our hands.

To the extent that such a charge is true, the fault lies mainly in our methodology and in the spirit which infuses that method. Ultimately the cure lies in the cultivation of a spirit of wonder. Some autobiographical comments help to explain this point. I can recall reading Charles Templeton's account of his gradual loss of faith after some years of memorable evangelistic ministry in Toronto and elsewhere. At one point in his biography, Templeton, a one-time friend of Billy Graham, judges that it might be useful to set down what he more or less used to believe, and what fundamentalists continue to believe.

I was embarrassed by the creed he sketched. I wanted to stand up and protest: "Not me! Please don't take me for such a fool!" And I suspect that I am not alone in wanting to avoid being tarred by that brush. However, the fact of the matter is that after the effects of a literalistic hermeneutic have been erased from this credo it remains pretty much that of conservative evangelicals. In large part the scandal remains.

We find it maddening that the busy onlooker, impatient with details, finds it hard to distinguish evangelicals from fundamentalists. This familiar phenomenon is nevertheless instructive. It reminds us that the evangelical creed is still a declaration of incredibilities, and that Scripture is a literary source which at face value claims the improbable on just about every page. James Orr, the formidable Scottish apologist for evangelical orthodoxy at the turn of the century, was one who recognized that this faith simply could not be domesticated to the spirit of the times. True Christianity, Orr discerned, was irreducibly supernatural.5 whenever an evangelical begins to reflect seriously on the faith, it is painful. The instinct of every normal mind (an instinct, incidentally, especially pronounced among those in systematic theology) is to make one's personal convictions coherent; that

is, to establish a set of beliefs that are both selfconsistent and consistent with reality—that fit together and fit the facts. We cannot suppress this instinct either, for as Kant observed, it is fundamental to the mind's operations.⁶

The tension lies in the fact that we tackle the challenge of coherence as moderns. It is vain self-deception to think that only non-evangelicals are infected by the spirit of the times. You might even say that we have the HIV virus in our own blood stream. It means, among other things, that we carry a very strong predisposition that truth will conform to the premises of inflexible natural law, and of the universe as a closed, self-explanatory system of cause and effect. This is our dilemma: as evangelicals committed to a supernatural creed while living as citizens of modern culture, we are caught with a foot in each of two separate canoes.

We cope in a number of ways, and the most common is to minimize our embarrassment, to try to scale down the scandalous features and to fall back on just a few essential elements which still violate modern presuppositions. The scandal remains, but (breathe a sigh of relief) on a smaller scale. In effect, we find ourselves tapping our toes to modernity's tune. We are dismayed when we look down at our shoes and find them moving. As David Hume, the Scottish sceptic, explained in his famous essay On Miracles, our quest is for coherence, and what could be more coherent than a worldview from which the incredible and the implausible have been excised? So we engage in reductionism. We scale down the offensive dimensions of Christian belief, but seldom with the thoroughness and nerve that would wipe out the substance of the faith altogether. In the end, our clumsiness and half-heartedness in applying our essentially rationalistic methodology are our redeeming features.

I can recall my struggle to sustain evangelical conviction during my doctoral studies in Scotland. It seemed as though some days the option of unbelief was visibly coiled before me, staring me down and flicking its forked tongue in my face. At times, immersed in sceptical literature, I would be swept by a nauseating wave as I "saw" the coherency of the anti-supernatural worldview. I had an evangelical friend who studied with me, got immersed in Kant and Hume, lost interest and returned home to Canada an agnostic. Part of what saved me, I suppose, was that I was in historical rather than

systematic theology. But the feeling nagged that I was on a methodological juggernaut that was bent on destroying faith altogether.

It was some time later that I was browsing through Karl Barth's Evangelical Theology: An Introduction and became fascinated by his attention to the condition of the effective theologian as a person. In particular, I was drawn to his chapter on wonder, and at that moment something clicked for me. For one thing, I was able to understand more clearly the attitude that undergirded Barth's work, and which had enabled him to embrace and even celebrate those features of the faith that can never be domesticated by the modern mindset. Far more importantly, I discovered in wonder a new manner of responding to the amazing truths Scripture reveals about God and his ways.

This wonder is not gullibility. Rather, it is a way of keeping pried open the steel door of scepticism which so often slams shut and seals us off from God and the transcendent realities for which our souls long. It is humble openness to possibility. It is deferment of the decision to reject. When diligently cultivated, wonder will generate a humility that will keep us from forcing the wonders of the faith into commonplace, understandable categories. And yet, as Barth points out, this wonder is none-theless "receptive and desirous to learn."

I am not suggesting for a moment that wonder is a way of knowing, that it has intrinsic epistemological value. Critical analysis has its essential place still. But the art of wondering means that we countenance the wonderful instead of summarily dismissing it. As the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh wrote, "God must be allowed to surprise us." I am far from accepting Tertullian's "vivid exaggeration" that he believed some Christian doctrines because they were absurd. Similarly, I do not buy Kierkegaard's hyperbolic suggestion that paradox is the sine qua non of truth. Nevertheless, these famous remarks, while technically false, do remind us that truth claims should not be dismissed simply because they are astonishing. Wonders may very well be "alarm-signals" that something of God is before us.

The art of wondering requires humility, but it is also the secret to liberation and freedom. Much of the joy of wonder stems from the fact that in the act of wondering we are authentically human. In wonder, we come close to Sam Keen's ideal for humanity: homo admirans. 10

Stimulus to Inquiry

here are other benefits from wonder as well. The spirit of wonder actually stimulates the scope and intensity of theological inquiry. As thaumazein (wonder) was the spark for Socratic philosophy and science, so wonder is the stimulus to contemplation and investigation in the region of divine revelation. Ludwig Wittgenstein has written a whole book on the wonder of the sheer fact that we exist rather than not exist. The modern novelist John Updike can wax eloquent on the wonder of our children. But, by and large, evangelical theologians are rather uncomfortable with wonder, and see our task (so it would sometimes seen) to be the elimination of it.

Take, by way of illustration, the little child who

Take, by way of illustration, the little child who begins to ask questions about the astonishing world: "Where did everything come from?" We reply with pleasure: "God, the Creator, brought it into being out of nothing." We are pleased that we have answered his question, and buttressed his faith. But then the child persists: "Where did God come from?" We are a little irritated, for our reference to God was designed to put an end to the questions. "God is infinite and eternal, without beginning or end." If the child persists after that mighty salvo, he is in danger of being charged with impertinence. Using tactics like this, we usually

manage to crush wonder. Far too often doctrines are the means by which we try to master the transcendent, and exorcise the wonder from our faith and our lives. There is something both sad and comic about the theologian who keeps trying to banish the "why" questions. Instead, we belabour the obvious, tediously repeat our stock replies to the few questions we can answer, and skirt the areas where we may run into questions we cannot answer or facts we cannot explain. Effectively we suck the wonder out of our theology because we see it as a dangerous thing. We think its persistence signals our incompetence. It threatens our control of the whole enterprise of theology. The result is that we earn for ourselves the epitaph once pinned by an English sports announcer to some ineffective Manchester United forwards: woefully devoid of imaginative ideas.

Religionize

Rationalize Theology

any students with zeal and even passion for spiritual reality yawn their way through assigned readings in evangelical theology. To them, most of the texts read like a General Motors parts manual. Unfortunately, most fail to recognize any significant connection between the theological enterprise and their quest for encounter with transcendent reality. The students I have in mind are evidently representative of a vast population which is passing over Christian theology to devour New Age literature. It appears that the latter's fabulous and bizarre content is swallowed for the sake of its enthusiastic offer of contact with the transcendent.

But to return to the students. In many cases, to be sure, the problem is that they are afflicted with a glandular-based, non-cognitive piety. Yet it would seem wise for us to reconsider whether the perceived unconnectedness of theology to vital religious experience is not due in part to the way we conduct the enterprise. As Daniel Taylor, an evangelical writer, has suggested, our methodology has tended to exaggerate the importance of the error-finding faculties of reason and analysis. The result has been an impoverishment of both theology and church life. "The mystery of the Gospel, the paradox of the Incarnation, the wondrous enigma of grace are freeze-dried into a highlyauthoritarian rationalized and/or system theology. 11

The way to correct the seemingly irreligious quality of much of our evangelical theology is to breathe back into it a spirit/pneuma of true religion. We feel awkward and uncomfortable about doing this-vulnerable, actually-for it would require us to become more subjectively involved in what we are doing. We prefer to serve up "hard truth" and let the students figure out what to do with it. This is really an abdication of duty, and a departure from a rich tradition of Christian theology which includes Augustine's Confessions and Anselm's Proslogion-works of profound reflection, but reflection carried out in the conscious and reverent presence of God. The important thing, of course, is not the literary genre of our theological prose, but whether or not our theologizing breathes a spirit of religion, whether or not it shows signs of admiring contemplation of God and of his activities past and present. The truth is that theologians are not necessarily religious, and in cases where they are, they have too frequently assumed that it would be bad form to expose the fact in their theological work.

Schleiermacher wreaked such havoc for evangelical orthodoxy that we are inclined to dismiss everything he said as deceptive error. Nonetheless, it was he who noted that a taste for the infinite, a sense of wonder, lay at the heart of religion. ¹² It would seem on this point at least that he was entirely correct, for if we regard religion as our apprehension of God, and our response to him, then wonder is an eminently fitting response to our encounter with the mysterious ways of the God who stands above and beyond us and our ways.

John Webster Grant, in Moon of Wintertime, his history of efforts to evangelize Canada's aboriginal peoples, reports the journal comments of a Hudson's Bay Company factor who watched Methodist James Evans competing with an equally-vigorous Oblate priest for native converts in the 1840s. Evans was outstanding, but one of his disadvantages, suggested the fur-trader, was that Evans was barely distinguishable from the commerciallypreoccupied traders themselves, while the Oblate, with his striking gown, pendulous cross and cadaverous visage, breathed an otherworldly, spiritual air to which the Indians were much attracted. 13 The moral of the story is not that evangelicals should attire themselves as priests and look haggard. The point is simply that nineteenth century Western Canadian Indians had strong religious instincts, and were drawn to a figure whom they believed offered access to spiritual reality.

Reginald Bibby concludes Fragmented Gods, his sociological analysis of contemporary Canadian religion, with a challenge that the church supply the national population with satisfaction for their hunger for the numinous. ¹⁴ Apparently at least one thing has not changed in Canada in the last one hundred and fifty years, and the challenge now as then is to demonstrate that the evangelical faith is in touch with spiritual reality.

What an irony it would be if in our efforts to make the faith plausible to ourselves, and marketable to others, we robbed it of those dimensions for which modern people, consciously or unconsciously, yearn. On the other hand, what a felicitous revolution it would be, for example, if we could infuse our treatment of the doctrine of creation with a sense of the wonder of sheer existence—that we should happen to have been

brought into being; and following from that, then, a sense of life as a gift and as a privilege to participate, however fleetingly, in something wonderful.

Is there not some condemnation of us and our craft in the fact that the doctrine of God receives the yawn it does? If only we were better able to stimulate a contagious wonder at, for example, the profound goodness of God, and all that involves and guarantees. Should it not, must it not, be a priority among us to help people see the wonder of the gift of human freedom, that we should be invested with real autonomy and powers of self-determination and creativity—that within the sphere of God's sure sovereignty we are able to set in motion by our choices and initiatives events of eternal consequences?

Somehow too we need to find ways of conveying a sense of the profound wonder of being loved. We have to face head-on the staggering incredibility that the infinite God of the universe become one of us—just once, as a Jewish peasant (the so-called scandal of particularity), and not only that, but died—"Tis mystery all, the immortal dies, who can explore His strange design?" All wonders reach their pinnacle in the wonder of Christ. As Barth says: "Christ is the infinitely wondrous event which compels a person, so far as he experiences and comprehends this event, to be necessarily, profoundly, wholly, and irrevocably astonished." 15

There is also the wonder of grace, amazing grace, and the miracle of regeneration, that continually repeated work of real and substantial transformation in the soul—a transformation which stands as a reality after the psychology of religion has done its best to scale it down and explain it away. We could speak of the wonder of the operations of the Holy Spirit in our interior lives and in the world, and the staggering reality of prayer as significant, effectual communication with the living God.

Then there is our future hope that the vast, complex and pulsating course of history will draw to a final culmination in as unlikely a manner as our salvation was made possible—a man shall descend from the clouds as he ascended two thousand years ago, and the corporate, political, economic and military empires of this earth shall fade to nothing. Bodies, long decayed and long since absorbed back into the eco-system, and beyond all vestiges of original identity, shall be reconstituted and raised incorruptible. Barth suggests rather severely that a

theologian who has ceased to wonder should really pack it in, and find mundane work more suited to the dimensions of his heart and mind ¹⁶

Foster Worship and Praise

am Keen, whose profound analysis of wonder was mentioned earlier, has come to expect very little in the way of the experience of wonder and celebration from formal religion. He writes:

The sanctuary is so seldom filled with vitality and enthusiasm. The words are still there; "celebration," "joy," "hope," "love." But the music drags, and there is no dancing and little radical openness to surprise and change. In my experience, the substance of wonder is more frequently found in the prose of the secular than in the often quaint poetry of religion. The sacred is in the profane; the holy is in the quotidian; the wonder is in the world.¹⁷

These are sobering words, not only because we fear that they may be representative of a considerable body of opinion, but also because they may contain a significant amount of truth. How long has it been, for example, since we heard the resurrection of Jesus described in anything like Kavanagh's exhilarating image: "a laugh freed forever and ever?" 18

To be sure, the renewal of worship is going on in significant pockets, but we are also aware of the relative unconnectedness of these worship initiatives to the theological foundations of evangelicalism. Theology has to demonstrate that it has a connection and a contribution to make.

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Once again, I believe, the connection rests in the doxological tendencies of wonder. Daniel Hardy and David Ford, a father and son-in-law team of theologians from the University of Birmingham, England, begin their important work on Praising and Knowing God by observing that "most of us know things, values and people that evoke our wonder and admiration. They draw us into wanting to do justice to them by responding appropriately."19 Hardy and Ford detect a universal human tendency to find that appropriate response in praise—the raising of the object of attention to its true status in such a way as to arouse others to appreciate it.²⁰ Sadly, there is a great deal of idolatry about, and God is not always the object of the praise of which they speak.

Nonetheless, the point is that wonder, being a humble admiration of that which is beyond our ability to master, is by definition the very threshold of worship. Evangelical theology, properly conducted, can serve to foster and deepen rather than extinguish the worship instincts of the people of God. The Apostle Paul is the theologian's model. After having explored in Romans 9-11 the enigma of Israel's future in the divine plan of redemption. and after having evidently failed to come to a clear conclusion on everything, he bursts out with doxology. He does not burst out with rash assertions or expressions of frustration, but with these words: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! ... To him be the glory forever!" (NIV).

Conclusion

udolf Otto sets us on the right track, I believe, when he suggests that it is possible to cultivate a sensitivity to the numinous.²¹ We should take encouragement from that the fact that likewise we can cultivate a spirit of wonder in our theology. And we should not fear that this might make us flaky or less rigorous in the analytic aspects of our discipline. For it is not the activity of reasoning *per se*, but the attitude in which it is carried out, that is decisive. To put it another way, "it is not the effort to control but the assumption that one has completely mastered that leads to the loss of zest and delight."²²

In summary, an infusion of a spirit of wonder would provide an antidote to the scepticism and reductionism that seem to be inherent in our theological methodology. At the some time wonder would stimulate the exploration of new horizons. In addition to thus affecting the dimensions of evangelical affirmation and discussion, wonder could also transform the ethos of evangelical theology by making it more recognizably religious and supportive of worship. Theology could thereby earn reinstatement to its rightful place at the centre of the life of the church.

To these ends, wonder should be stressed in our treatments of theological prolegomena, as an element of the spirit in which theology ought to be conducted. Even more importantly, it should be evident in both the tone and content of our theological lectures and writing. These things demand tha

wonder first characterize the evangelical theologian himself or herself. Such wonder must be cultivated. To that end, analytic skills must be balanced by contemplative discipline. Evangelical theology will be renewed when its practitioners are bold enough to celebrate, rather than downplay, the fact that orthodox faith is actually a constellation of shining incredibilities.

Endnotes

1. Matthew Arnold, God and the Bible, popular ed. (1906) viii; quoted by Basil Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies (New York, 1949) 263.

2. In coming to understanding of it, I am much indebted to Sam Keen's extensive analysis of it in his Apology for Wonder (New York, 1969), though I have not followed his analysis slavishly.

3. Helmut Thielicke, A Little Exercise for Young The-

ologians (Grand Rapids, 1962) 26.

4. Charles Templeton, An Anecdotal Memoir

(Toronto, 1983) 67-68.

5. James Orr, The Christian View of God and the World (Edinburgh, 1893) 10, 49.6. Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena (1783), ed. and trans. P. Gray Lucas (Manchester, 1953) 136.

7. Karl Barth, Evangelical Theology: An Introduction (Grand Rapids, 1963) 64.

8. Quoted by Daniel Hardy and David Ford, Praising and Knowing God (Philadelphia, 1985) 71.

 Robert Terwilliger, Christian Believing (New York, 1973) 16.

- 10. Sam Keen, Apology for Wonder (New York, 1969) 61.
- 11. Daniel Taylor, The Myth of Certainty (Waco, TX, 1986) 56-57.
- Millard Erickson, Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, 1985) 29.
 Paul Pruyser, Between Belief and Unbelief (New
- York, 1974) 57. 14. John Webster Grant, Moon of Wintertime
- (Toronto, 1984) 115. 15. Reginald Bibby, Fragmented Gods (Toronto,
- 1987) 262-263. 16. Barth, Evangelical Theology, 71.

17. Ibid., 71.

18. Keen, Apology for Wonder, 15

19 Hardy and Ford, Praising and Knowing God, 73.

20. Ibid., 1. 21. Ibid., 158.

22. Pruyser, Between Belief and Unbelief, 57.

23. Keen, Apology for Wonder, 58.