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Staley Foundation Lecture

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by Lillian V. Grissen

Staley Foundation Lecture

Last October Dordt College was the recipient for the first time of a Staley Foundation Lectureship grant. The choice for the lecture series was Dr. Mark A. Noll, professor of history and church history at Wheaton College. Noll chose for his subject "Reformed and Evangelical: Complementary Adjectives or Competing Alternatives?" Rarely has food for thought been served to us so delightfully spiced with humor and molded into the apt turn of the phrase. Nor was the word "evangelical" used here in contrast to "reformed" as it would be used to contrast the main line denominations, but rather it was used to indicate fundamentalist leanings as contrasted with reformed.

In his first lecture Noll gave a general sketch to help us understand how the evangelicals arrived at their present position. He called attention to the influence of the American Revolution, the frontier, Scottish Common Sense Realism, the principle of *sola scriptura*, and revivalism. These in amalgamation give American Evangelicalism its distinctive characteristics, some of them laudable and some inviting some criticism.

Noll devoted his second lecture to an enumeration and explanation of some strengths among the Evangelicals which could invite emulation among the Reformed, principally the following three: (1) A practicality which is willing to subordinate differences to get the task in hand done. Among these are the spread of the gospel, the organization of Sunday Schools through the American Sunday School Union, and various campaigns against social evils such as

slavery, saloons, and prostitution. (2) The individualistic character of grace with emphasis on personal confrontation and personal decision. Evangelicals show a constant willingness to confront individuals with the claims of the gospel. The Reformed tend to stress "the embracing rather than the penetrating character of grace." We should follow that example of Evangelicalism without falling into the atomism of individualism. (3) An ability to adapt to the American scene, of which we are now an integral part. This should be done even though we face a dilemma. While our isolation may render us irrelevant, our integration has the hazard of trivialization.

In his last lecture Noll complimented the Reformed for some of the complementary strengths by which they might fortify Evangelicalism. He intimated that enthusiasm for ecumenism had not obliterated his appreciation for worthwhile and necessary differences among various Christian communions. As if he had been apprenticed to a Christian Reformed minister, Noll again had three points. (1) The Reformed could help the Evangelicals by giving them an appreciation for the historical context of their faith in the roots of Protestantism. "Evangelicals who waste away with panting for the supernatural quick fix need to see from the Reformed that God's temporal concern expresses itself in centuries and decades as well as seconds and minutes." (2) Evangelicals can learn to develop a better appreciation for organic relationships as the Reformed have tried to work them out in the

various aspects of life. Evangelicals must learn "how God-given structures of church and vocational life nourish Christian community." (3) The Reformed have an appreciation for a sound theological tradition. Noll called attention to the three Standards of Unity, which constitute the Reformed confessions in the Dutch tradition, saying, "The Heidelberg Catechism is justly the crown jewel of the Standards of Unity." Wisely, Noll did not compliment the

complements without considering cautions. There is no cause for boastful chest thumping. It is possible to turn every virtue into a vice. They have sometimes been so turned. Noll maintained a fine balance between compliment and critique. The former never degenerated to flattery and the latter never penetrated to the quick. We are looking forward to a return engagement by our Wheaton friend.

Nick Van Til

African Liberation Theology

Talk of liberation theology, not only for Africa but also for Latin America, began in 1974 in Tanzania at a conference attended by black Christian leaders from across the African continent. Although problems differed, the need for liberation on the two continents was obvious and imperative.

So said Dr. Christian Goncalves Baeta, professor emeritus of evangelical theology at the Ecumenical Institute of Rulin Universitat, Bochouu, West Germany. Dr. Baeta, a citizen of Ghana, West Africa, earned his doctorate in philosophy at the University of London. He has been awarded honorary degrees in the United States, Japan, Germany, and Ghana. Dr. Baeta addressed the Dordt faculty in October, speaking on Black liberation theology as it is currently articulated in Africa.

Revolution, said Dr. Baeta, must of necessity be included in liberation theology. Just as Diedrich Bonhoeffer knew that for the Christian comes a time when he must resist, so revolution must of necessity be considered in liberation theology. African liberation theology is concerned with implementing Christ's words, taken from Isaiah 61:1:

He has sent me to bind up the

brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners

"While the poor are becoming poorer, the rich are becoming richer," said Dr. Baeta. Therefore, theology must be liberated from irrelevance. One must hear the pains and sighs of the people—and reflect on them. Starting, not from tradition, but from this kind of reflection, theology should develop new insights for practice.

Although Dr. Baeta expressed criticism of the "social gospel" in its attempt "to liberate without the gospel," he insisted that "liberation is the key of the gospel" for the Third World. He defined the Third World as "first of all, the non-Western world; secondly, the non-Russian world; and finally, the non-Australian and non-Japanese world."

Dr. Baeta compared America's "Black problem" with the problem of Blacks in South Africa; America's 11 percent Black population aspires only to peaceful coexistence based on equal justice for all, while South Africa's 84 percent Black population may someday take control. America's Blacks were uprooted involuntarily, while South African Blacks continue to live in their own environment.