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Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism (Book Review)

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Reformed, evangelical, and fundamentalist Christians in North America today. It may come as a surprise to many that before 1960 there was very meager support among Bible-believing scholars for the idea that the . . . earth (and universe) was only a few thousand years old. Likewise, the notion that . . . earth's rock layers and sediments could be explained by the flood of Noah was largely confined to Seventh-Day Adventist circles. Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Herman Bavinck, and Louis Berkhof (among other theologians), and William Jennings Bryan, leader of the anti-evolution crusade after World War I, all allowed, one way or another, that the . . . earth was very old. They did not argue with the fossil record or the great age the geological column implies.

It was George McCready Price, a Seventh-Day Adventist concerned to square . . . earth-history with some of the prophecies of Adventist Ellen G. White, who undertook to deny the realities of modern astronomy. Price's scientific background was minimal, but his devotion to his cause filled his life. He turned

his back on scientific information, and favored a populist reading of the Bible.

If there is one criticism I have of Numbers' book, it is its brief treatment of the views of the leading late nineteenth and early twentieth century Presbyterian and Reformed scholars. Charles Hodge is mentioned several times, but Warfield only once briefly. Bavinck and Berkhof, among others, are passed over. It should be said in defense of Numbers, however, that the development of Scientific Creationism is largely a fundamentalist movement, not one that grew in Reformed circles. And the book is full-length as it is.

Whatever your views on creation and evolution, if you are a teacher or preacher, a church elder, a scientist, or just a person who wants to be well informed, you will learn much from a careful reading of Ronald L. Numbers' *The Creationists*. It presents the historical record fairly, and should serve as a basis of any future discussions. I hope its irenic tone and fairness to all viewpoints will encourage constructive and peaceful discussion of these issues among Christ's people.

Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism, by Michael Scott Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 187 pages, hardback, \$13.99. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Books are very much like people. That should not be too surprising, I guess, seeing that literature is a human cultural artifact. There are people whom you want to like: you agree with most of what they say; but there's something about their personal style or approach to things that simply puts your teeth on edge. That was my immediate response to this book. At the very same moment I found my head voluntarily bobbing up and down in agreement, I would also be muttering under my breath that Horton has gone about it all wrong.

In his dust-jacket blurb for the book, J.I. Packer calls Horton's book a Jeremiad. I think that's right, especially if we keep the Oxford Dictionary definition of the word in mind. A Jeremiad is a writing or speech given "in a strain of grief or distress; a doleful complaint; a complaining tirade." The plan of the book is simple enough. Horton has written a litany of the faults and foibles of modern American evangelicalism. For eight chapters he does nothing but gripe about evangelical subjectivism, pragmatism, consumerism, Arminianism, civil religion, secularism, individualism, and sensationalism. Yes, these are all realities within the evangelical ethos, and yes, they are all worthy of criticism, but Horton's whiny bombast is a long way from analysis. By the time he gets to chapter 8: "The Loss of Community," the "last problem on the list," I sent up a prayer of thanks that he was almost finished.

While Horton's book in itself does not merit much more than a notice, it does raise two issues regarding a Reformed response to popular evangelicalism that are worthy of attention. The first issue is one of style. Reformed thought has often, and rightly, been criticized for being too negative, for being long on criticism and short on construction. When we read a book or listen to an address we look for problems, faulty reasoning, facile acceptance of the popular. Heresy hunting is more than a past-time for us; it is part of our self-understanding as Reformed Christians. However, although we must contend for the faith, we are called to do so without being contentious. Being Reformed should not mean being intellectually quarrelsome or prone to theological and philosophical strife.

Horton is a good example of a bad Reformed trait. His book reads like a final exam for a course in Gerstner apologetics. He breaks the first rule of constructive theological polemic: describe your subjects in such a way that they will recognize themselves in the description. When this is done, you will speak to no one but the already converted. The truly good book is meant to persuade its readers, not merely give them ammunition for prior biases. Horton's rejection of adequate description and analysis in favor of lampoon and caricature is more reminiscent of Rush Limbaugh than some of the "heroes" of the faith that he alludes to in

his book. Horton tells us that evangelicals reduce the Christian faith to easy slogans and clichés. Yet he too often responds with counter-slogans, put-downs, and jeers. Though he has a good eye for a pithy and cutting quotation, he uses his sources unmercifully in his broadside. The book is so source-bound that it's hard to tell what is the product of the author's own insight and what is merely the compilation of citations and the parroting of others. The negative tone becomes tiresome as the material becomes repetitive. Earlier ideas, arguments, and even citations often make second appearances toward the end of the book. All in all, Horton has whined far too much, and contributed far too little.

Second, the book is inadequate in its proposed medication for the ills of evangelicalism—his antidotes are as troublesome as the ailments. To replace evangelical sentimentality and subjectivism, Horton calls us back to the objectivistic doctrinalism of seventeenth-century Protestant Europe. He constantly refers to Christianity as intellectual, objective, rational, doctrinal knowledge. The Bible is a storehouse of data about the attributes of God to be analyzed by the intellect (156f). Being a Christian is being able to explain the doctrine of justification (53), knowing that Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and being able to name all four Gospels.

Horton is a Neo-Puritan—he thinks the Puritans had it right. All development in confessional and theological response since the seventeenth century is at best suspect, and at worst spiritual and theologically bankrupt. Consistently the book states that the old is better or more true than the new. Horton wants to contrast what he calls “authentic evangelicalism” with “the less authentic variety” of modern Arminian, pietistic, revivalistic evangelicalism. This problematic clearly shows that Horton thinks of evangelicalism as a theological position rather than an historical, confessional movement, or better—as George Marsden argued—a loose coalition of confessional movement. To speak of evangelicalism as an inauthentic historical phenomenon is like calling it a round triangle. What

makes the Arminian, pietistic, revivalistic tradition “inauthentic evangelicalism”? A Methodist or Baptist theologian might argue that it is they and not the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition that represents authentic evangelicalism. The writings of Donald Dayton and Melvin Dieter have, in fact, done that quite well. And just what is it that Horton calls “authentic evangelicalism”? The tradition of Augustine, the Reformation, and the Puritans (13). But is this one, single historical tradition? The word “Puritan” alone represents a fairly long-lived and varied collection of thinkers. George Whitefield (who coined many of the popular evangelical slogans Horton criticizes) is a long way from Richard Baxter, and in many ways they are both light years away from Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin (who were also very different people and separated by over 1100 years). Speaking of the Reformation and the Puritans in the same breath fuses the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into a single movement. Modern Presbyterian and Reformed doctrinalism tends to miss the fact that seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism cannot be backread into the Reformation period, and the doctrinalist mindset of the Westminster Confession cannot be imposed upon the Belgic Confession.

There is something fundamentally cowardly, even traitorous about the current lionization of a Puritan primordium. Michael Bauman's *Pilgrim Theology* makes the point well:

We are not called to live in the past, romantic though it might seem to us. Nor are we granted leave to sit idly by, wistfully longing for some previous age, allegedly golden. Whenever we do so, we have turned from history to nostalgia—and nostalgia is a failure of nerve. By it we flinch from a daunting present and shrink from an imposing future. (214)

Horton's book may have some value for those who are looking for sources that articulate the vexing problems of modern evangelicalism, but his self-righteous, us-versus-them tone and easy affirmation of doctrinalism and Puritan tradition suggest that the book creates more problems than it's worth.