

An Uneasy Ecclesiology: Carl F. H. Henry's Doctrine of the Church

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This article evaluates Carl F. H. Henry's ecclesiology and argues that he highlighted regenerate church membership and mission while he downplayed the local aspects of the church (such as polity and the ordinances). The accent of Henry's ecclesiology was always placed over the wide swath of churches in the Reformation tradition, rather than a particular stream located therein. This was due to Henry's unique historical context and calling. This article both affirms and expands upon Russell Moore's previous work on the topic. The strengths of Henry's approach lie in the value of a unified evangelical voice in the face of encroaching secularism. The weaknesses lie in the neglect of denominational riches and the possible minimization of God's ordained vehicle for Christian discipleship: the local church.

Key Words: Baptist, Carl F. H. Henry, ecclesiology, evangelicalism, Holy Spirit, mission, ordinances, regenerate church membership, unity

Introduction

One of evangelicalism's greatest minds broke a cardinal rule of pastoral ministry: remove names slowly from the church's membership rolls. But Carl F. H. Henry, as the new pastor of Humboldt Park Baptist Church, refused to wait. In a November 11, 1940 letter sent to select members of the church body, Henry stated:

Forget for a moment that I am the new pastor. Let's look at some of the fine things about Humboldt Park Church. We have a splendid building, with ample room. Then, there is a growing atmosphere of worship and friendliness. Of course we are not perfect, but the church spirit is good, and visitors feel as welcome and as much at home as we members do.

We have an increasingly loyal and faithful membership that gives willingly of its time for the Lord's work. The membership list was carefully reviewed during the past week and nineteen names were removed. I am happy to say that the church desires you to continue in fellowship. It will be good in the coming weeks to find you in the heart of the

work with us. Mrs. Henry and I are eager to know you better, too.¹

About two weeks prior, however, other members received a different note from Henry's desk:

The other day the Humboldt Park members voted on the church's membership list. The deacons, as all good deacons do, recommended the dropping of certain names, deceased members, those who had moved to distant addresses and no longer kept up their church interests, and also members now living in the area of church influence but who had not attended during the past year or more. . . . Your name was on this list.²

He concluded by urging the recipient to join the church for worship and alert them of their intentions in remaining a member. He finished with the reminder that he was always available for spiritual counsel.

Of course, Henry would go on from his early pastorate to become neo-evangelicalism's chief theological voice.³ However, despite his early pastoral experience and impressive career output, Henry has been critiqued for neglecting ecclesiology. Russell Moore coined Henry "the quintessential parachurch academic" and wondered if he "even had an ecclesiology, and, if so, whether there was anything distinctively Baptist about it."⁴ Gregory Thornbury thinks Henry "placed too much confidence in big-event and big-organization evangelicalism and could have benefited from thinking more organically and ecclesially."⁵ James Leo Garrett agrees that Henry neglected ecclesiology.⁶ Albert Mohler, who counts

¹ Carl F. H. Henry to Humboldt Park Baptist Church, 11 November 1940, Box 1940–1941, Folder "Humboldt Park Baptist Church," Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Roling Library, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

² Carl F. H. Henry to Humboldt Park Baptist Church, 30 October 1940, Box 1940–1941, Folder "Humboldt Park Baptist Church," Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Roling Library, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

³ For an excellent treatment of neo-evangelicalism, see Owen Strachan, *Awakening the Evangelical Mind: An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). For more on Henry, see R. Albert Mohler, "Carl F. H. Henry," in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, ed. Timothy George and David Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 2001).

⁴ Russell Moore, "God, Revelation, and Community: Ecclesiology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of Carl F. H. Henry," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8.4 (Winter 2004): 27.

⁵ Gregory Thornbury, *Recovering Classic Evangelicalism: Applying the Wisdom and Vision of Carl F. H. Henry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 23.

⁶ James Leo Garrett, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon: Mercer

Henry as a theological mentor and friend, believes that “the most glaring omission in his theological project is the doctrine of the church.”⁷

To circle back to Russell Moore’s question: Did Henry have an ecclesiology? This article will argue that yes, he did, and will concur with (and seek to build upon) Moore’s conclusion in his excellent “God, Revelation, and Community: Ecclesiology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of Carl F. H. Henry”:

The theological foundations for the universal—or “invisible” (as it is, unfortunately, often called)—church were established in Henry’s thought at the most basic levels. What was missing was theological specificity on some of the things that make a church a church—the ordinances, membership, church government, and so forth. It is not debatable that these issues were often intentionally minimized to maintain unity within an evangelical movement seeking to take on Protestant liberalism, separatist fundamentalism, and cultural nihilism.⁸

In affirming Moore’s conclusion, this article will also expand upon his findings by exploring unpublished data from Henry’s archival material, and by utilizing a wider range from his overall catalog. Specifically, the article will evaluate Henry’s ecclesiological thought and demonstrate that he emphasized the areas of regenerate church membership and mission while he deemphasized the *local* aspects of the church—areas like polity and the ordinances. Further, it will show that Henry’s ecclesiology was calibrated precisely for his unique historical context and theological program (a point Moore notes as well). Henry’s ecclesiology can be referred to as *uneasy* because the neo-evangelical movement was consciously hesitant to prioritize ecclesiological distinctives in order to include a broad range of denominational allies. He did not avoid addressing ecclesiology, but when he did it was always with an ecumenical tone. One hears this in his urging fellow evangelicals to “make ecclesiology a *chief item* of theological concern in order to fully manifest what it means to be Christ’s *one* church.”⁹ Ecclesiology was important, but the local was often overshadowed by the universal—Christ’s *one* church.

University Press, 2009), 519.

⁷ Mohler, “Carl F. H. Henry,” 292.

⁸ Moore, “God, Revelation, and Community,” 33.

⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1984), 34 (emphasis added).

Baptist Convictions, Broader Commitments

Before defending the article’s thesis, it is important to note Henry’s own ecclesiological ties. Carl F. H. Henry was a Baptist. He credited the interdenominational climate at Wheaton College as a primary reason he was forced to wrestle with and coalesce his views of baptism and church membership. Specifically, as he studied Scripture and conversed with professors and other Christian leaders, Henry adopted baptistic views.¹⁰ As noted above, his first (and only) pastorate was at Humboldt Park Baptist Church in Chicago.¹¹ His ordination was encouraged by the Chicago Baptist Association, which was affiliated with the Northern Baptist Convention. In correspondence regarding teaching duties at his alma mater, Henry expressed to one administrator that he desired “to see the systematics course at Wheaton in the hands of a Baptist.”¹² Toward the end of his public ministry, in 1987, the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors’ Conference recognized Henry’s contributions to theology from a Baptist perspective.¹³

While Henry was a decided Baptist, “his most critical involvements have been outside denominational life.”¹⁴ Henry’s Baptist views were convictional but not cliquish. Rather, his ministry was targeted at a wide, trans-denominational evangelicalism that embraced conservative Christians from a variety of traditions. He sought to engage those who may disagree on second-tier issues in order to establish a unified and theologically informed evangelical voice. He was willing to “go to the wall to defend” such non-negotiables as Scripture and Christology in a way he was not willing to do with ecclesiology.¹⁵ Further, although he excelled at articulating the goals of a broad evangelicalism, he struggled to coalesce these into the local church context. Because of this, his ecclesiology was designed for cruising altitude; he was less focused on the taxi of week-to-week local church life.

¹⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, “Twenty Years a Baptist,” *Foundations* 1 (January 1958): 46–47.

¹¹ Mohler, “Carl F. H. Henry,” 292.

¹² Carl F. H. Henry to Merrill Tenney, 18 March 1946, Collection 628, Box 3, Folder 18, Billy Graham Center Archives, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

¹³ Mohler, “Carl F. H. Henry,” 293.

¹⁴ Mohler, “Carl F. H. Henry,” 292.

¹⁵ Richard Mouw, “Toward a Full-Orbed Evangelical Ethic,” in *Essential Evangelicalism: The Enduring Influence of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. Matthew J. Hall and Owen Strachan (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 52.

With Henry's ecclesiological situation addressed, this article will now turn to a defense of the thesis: that Carl Henry emphasized the areas of regenerate church membership and mission while he deemphasized the *local* aspects of the church.

The Citizens of the New Society: Regenerate Church Membership

As Bob Patterson remarks, "Evangelicals are a particularly 'scrappy' people, and Henry has always been in the middle of the war."¹⁶ One of Henry's consistent battles was with liberal church traditions that superseded soteriology with ethics:

Insofar as the professing Church is unregenerate and hence a stranger to the power of true love, it should surprise no one that it conceives its mission to be the Christianizing of the world rather than the evangelizing of mankind, and that it relies on other than supernatural dynamic for its mission in the world.¹⁷

Henry clashed with a Protestant liberalism that "had replaced a regenerate church over which the resurrected Messiah ruled as Head with a largely unregenerate visible church."¹⁸ He understood the church to be more than an organization simply designed to dissolve worldly ills. Rather, it was a redeemed society made of twice-born men and women who claimed allegiance to Christ and his mission (John 3:1–21). While Henry routinely critiqued this liberal Protestant view of the church as only a means for social transformation, he was equally critical of the Fundamentalist tendency toward an underdeveloped ecclesiology:

Neglect of the doctrine of the Church, except in defining separation as a special area of concern, proved to be another vulnerable feature of the fundamentalist forces. This failure to elaborate the biblical doctrine of the Church comprehensively and convincingly not only contributes to the fragmenting spirit of the movement but actually hands the initiative to the ecumenical enterprise in defining the nature and relations of the churches.¹⁹

¹⁶ Bob Patterson, *Carl F. H. Henry, Makers of the Modern Theological Mind* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983), 169.

¹⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco: Word, 1966), 15.

¹⁸ Russell Moore, "The Kingdom of God in the Social Ethics of Carl F. H. Henry: A Twenty-First Century Evangelical Reappraisal," *JETS* 55 (2012): 390.

¹⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 35.

In articulating the nature of the church and the necessity of regenerate church membership, Henry often employed vocabulary stressing the *new*. For Henry, "the fellowship of the believers is to be the new community."²⁰ This new community does not float through the world aimlessly but rather fulfills her unique call from God:

The church thus ministers in the world as a servant for Christ's sake and bears a good conscience in view of its calling. Its task is not to force new structure upon society at large, but to be the new society, to exemplify in its own ranks the way and will of God.²¹

Henry directly related the concept of the *new man* to the *new society*. Recalling Paul's logical thread in Rom 10:14–15, Henry wondered, "How can a new social order be built without new men? How shall there be new men unless they are born again? How shall they be born again until they come to a personal and saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? How shall they come to such a relationship unless they hear the Gospel?"²² When one experiences the new birth they are ushered into a new social order, a new community, a new people—the local church. This "new society lives in the larger world as a colony of heaven obedient to the crucified and living Lord."²³ Indeed, "when Christianity discusses the new society, it speaks not of some intangible future reality whose specific features it cannot as yet identify, but of the regenerate church called to live by the standards of the coming King."²⁴ This new family is based not on human blood lines but on redemption, "the blood of unity in the cross."²⁵

In terms of the *specific* duties and responsibilities of church membership, Henry said little. He did, however, address the lax and careless lives many members lived. A new society should be markedly different from the fallen world around it, and Henry routinely chastised the mindset that membership did not entail holiness. He sensed that a "credibility gap"

²⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 4:530. Hereafter *GRA*.

²¹ Henry, *GRA*, 4:530.

²² Carl F. H. Henry, "What Is the Way to a New Society?" *Christianity Today* (November 26, 1956): 23.

²³ Carl F. H. Henry, "The Church in the World or the World in the Church?" *JETS* 34 (September 1991): 381.

²⁴ Henry, *GRA*, 4:522.

²⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, "John," in *The Biblical Expositor*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman, 1960), 3:181.

existed in many churches between what members preached versus how they spoke and interacted in the community at large.²⁶ Henry was convinced that if a church entertains ungodliness among her ranks, her effectiveness will be severely hamstrung:

Never is the church more effective . . . than when she provides a living example in her own ranks of what new life in Christ implies, and never is she more impotent than when she imposes new standards on the world that she herself neglects.²⁷

He also noted that:

While, however, the Christian community is not guilty of *the sin* against the Holy Spirit, it is guilty of *sins* against the Holy Spirit. This explains why the Church, the organism of believers, is such an impotent and peripheral force in the world today.²⁸

Because of the danger in failing to uphold biblical standards among members of the new society, Henry was an advocate of biblical church discipline. He saw “clear biblical precedent for the discipline of true believers who, falling into gross sin, thereby invite excommunication.”²⁹

What Henry did emphasize, on the positive side, were the spiritual benefits that come with being a member of the body. In speaking with college students about the importance of local church membership, Henry noted that “there are vital spiritual lessons which the Christian can learn only in constant fellowship with those of believing faith.”³⁰ He harkened back to the early church to demonstrate that being a member of the Christian community was “a life and death decision,” a far cry from the modern sense of membership.³¹ If members are to fulfill their responsibilities to one another and to the Great Commission, they need routine encouragement and edification, which can only be experienced as a functioning member of the body.

The Life of the New Society: The Holy Spirit

In tandem with his thoughts on the need for a *holy* church, Carl Henry

²⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Spirit of Pentecost: Will a Powerless Church Recover Its God-Given Soul?” *Christianity Today* (April 14, 1967): 29.

²⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *A Plea for Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 67.

²⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 470.

²⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Perils of Independency,” *Christianity Today* (November 12, 1956): 20.

³⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, *Giving a Reason for Our Hope* (Boston: W.A. Wilde Company, 1949), 95.

³¹ Henry, *Giving a Reason for Our Hope*, 95.

insisted upon the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit for a *healthy* church. He was adamant that the role of the Holy Spirit cannot be ignored in achieving a biblical ecclesiology.

In demonstrating the connection between pneumatology and ecclesiology, Henry often utilized the example of the early church. For Henry, too many churches are like Christ’s disciples in the interim between his ascension and Pentecost: a group of believers who have heard the echoes of a doctrine but have yet to experience true spiritual power. The Spirit’s outpouring was the life-giving breath necessary for the church to come alive:

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, nothing of value was accomplished in the primitive Church. And it is certain that without the illumination, renewal, and liberation made possible by the Holy Spirit, nothing of spiritual value will be accomplished in the Church of Jesus Christ in our time.³²

Henry thought that “many Christian churches have too long obscured the Holy Spirit’s person and work, and that recovery of the doctrine and reality of the Spirit by the community of faith is spiritually imperative.”³³ The impetus for this recovery lies in the fact that “to neglect the doctrine of the Spirit’s work—inspiration, illumination, regeneration, indwelling, sanctification, guidance—nurtures a confused and disabled church.”³⁴ Though undeveloped in certain areas, Henry’s ecclesiology nonetheless carries a pneumatological shape. He advocated that churches “resist and reject [a] stifling of the Holy Spirit” and insisted they “preserve ‘breathing room’ for him.”³⁵ Indeed, any church that neglects or excludes the Spirit of God “cannot fully claim to be Christian.”³⁶

A Mark of the New Society: Unity

Finally, one key mark of the new society that Henry stressed was that of unity. As mentioned, Henry was always working toward a unified evangelical voice in the face of encroaching secularism and naturalism. Drawing on Matt 16:18 and John 17:11, Henry claimed that “every appeal to

³² Henry, “The Spirit of Pentecost,” 28.

³³ Henry, *GRA*, 6:370–71.

³⁴ Henry, *GRA*, 4:272.

³⁵ Henry, *GRA*, 4:275.

³⁶ Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics*, 442.

an inerrant Bible should humiliate us before the inerrant Christ's insistence on the unity of his church."³⁷ He worried that a fractured evangelicalism would devolve into intramural quarreling with little energy left to engage a disintegrating world. Still, he cautioned ecumenically-minded evangelicals to guard against "the defects of the ecumenical establishment."³⁸ However, he chastised those who disdained any unified advance: "Does merely rejecting or absolving oneself of an ecumenical institutional badge justify the lack of evangelical interrelationships and of coordinated fellowship?"³⁹ Again, Henry's plea for unity was often articulated in macro-language:

There is one God, one Christ, one Spirit. Faith into God means spiritual unity. There is thus one Bride, one Body. The members differ, whether in terms of individuals or churches. . . . But all are members of a Body which cannot but be one. There is one Word, one Baptism, one Cup. Externals may vary. The one Word may go forth in different tongues, the one Baptism or Cup may be administered under different rules of order. Even the one faith or doctrine may be expressed with some difference of formulation. Yet the Word of God is one and invariable. The Baptism and Cup of the Lord are the same. The One in whom faith is set never alters. Here in God, in the Word and work of God, is an unassailable basis of given unity. Here the people of God have to be one, whether they are prepared for it or not.⁴⁰

Still, despite usually speaking of unity in terms of the universal church, Henry also recognized the importance of unity inside local churches, as evidenced by one 1940 pastoral letter he wrote: "I sometimes call it 'my church' but in point of fact, it is not mine alone; it belongs to both you and me. It is ours because it is Christ's. . . . Since, then, it is not my church but our church, we must work together. We are partners in the greatest enterprise on earth and co-laborers with God. I wish you might realize how dependent I am upon your active support, your regular presence at the services, and your prayers."⁴¹

³⁷ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 32.

³⁸ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 31.

³⁹ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 32.

⁴⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, "A Plea for Evangelical Unity," *Christianity Today* (March 13, 1961): 24.

⁴¹ Carl F. H. Henry to Humboldt Park Baptist Church, 18 November 1940.

Carl F. H. Henry believed the church to be "a transnational, transcultural, transracial community of regenerate sinners who as the people of God are shaped by the Scriptural revelation and seek to obey Christ Jesus in word and life."⁴² But what did he understand the church to *do*? Certainly, "to obey Christ Jesus in word and life." But what does this call entail? For Henry, it meant the church should be engaged in Christian mission.

The Call of the New Society: Mission

Carl Henry desperately wanted to see a surge of spiritual regeneration sweep the nation and the world at large. And while Henry's life was devoted to such ministries as education and publishing, he knew these would not be the epicenter of revival:

The local church—right where you are—is a crucial link in fulfilling this task. Parachurch movements have made an amazing impact in our time, largely because major denominations have neglected or have been unable to fulfill vital aspects of their mission. But revival has almost always begun in the local church, not in parachurch movements or in denominational headquarters. Renewal of the local congregation is vitally important for the evangelistic task.⁴³

Henry understood the local church's mission to be grouped into two distinct yet related categories: evangelism and social responsibility.

"A Passion to Turn the World Upside Down": Evangelism

Carl Henry cannot be accused of having a truncated vision. Indeed, "part of what made Carl Henry an indispensable evangelical was his relentless ambition . . . [it] was driven by a sense of urgency mixed with opportunity."⁴⁴ His urgency was demonstrated in his bold call for evangelism to radiate from the local church. The opportunity to do so was now:

If evangelical Christianity offers a richness of life not for sale in the Secular City, if it heralds a hope that can warm the coldest

⁴² Henry, "The Church in the World or the World in the Church?," 381.

⁴³ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 52.

⁴⁴ R. Albert Mohler, "The Indispensable Evangelical: Carl F. H. Henry and Evangelical Ambition in the Twentieth Century," in Hall and Strachan, *Essential Evangelicalism*, 37.

heart, if it guarantees a future that can surpass the prospect of a sojourn on the moon, if it can open the modern soul once again to the transcendent world, if its revelation of God can demonstrate the power and joy of new life in the spirit then now—*now*—is the time to trumpet the good news.⁴⁵

Local churches could not miss this opportunity for evangelism; God had called them into their particular geographical location for this very reason. As members of the new society lived in their homes, neighborhoods, and workplaces, Henry understood them to be walking ambassadors looking for opportunities to bear witness to their sovereign King (2 Cor 5:20).

According to Henry, “Every method of not evangelizing is wrong. Some methods surely are better than others, some more appropriate than others in different circumstances. Even from a timid gulp in an emotion-streaked testimony God can still get glory.”⁴⁶ Whatever evangelistic tool is utilized, “the best method is, always has been, and always will be person-to-person evangelism.”⁴⁷

Henry understood the church’s preaching, teaching, and outreach efforts to be tethered to this call for personal redemption through Christ. The church was not a brick-and-mortar bunker in which to hide from the perils of the world. Jesus commands his followers to live differently: “If the example of Jesus is any criterion at all for us, we ought not linger unduly in the pious isolation of the temple, but rather go out and speak out to the worst and best of unregenerate men concerning new life in Christ.”⁴⁸ For Henry, “a Christianity without a passion to turn the world upside down is not reflective of apostolic Christianity.”⁴⁹ His plea was that local churches would turn the world upside down by trumpeting the gospel message to all who could hear. Churches must “never relinquish this primary responsibility.”⁵⁰

Henry himself demonstrated a commitment to personal evangelism. As a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, “Carl Henry provided the most striking example of the faculty’s simultaneous deep commitment to

⁴⁵ Carl F. H. Henry, *New Strides of Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 24.

⁴⁶ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 50.

⁴⁷ Henry, *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society*, 51.

⁴⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *Evangelicals at the Brink of Crisis* (Waco: Word, 1967), 51.

⁴⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947, 2003), 16.

⁵⁰ Carl F. H. Henry, “Will American Baptists De-escalate or Advance Evangelism?” *Christianity Today* (April 14, 1967): 31.

evangelism and to scholarship. Though a leader in reforming fundamentalism, he always remained a true revivalist at heart.”⁵¹ One student recalled that Henry would occasionally arrive late to a Saturday morning seminar. He appeared “bedraggled in an old baggy overcoat. Later the class learned that he would periodically spend half the night out in Los Angeles witnessing to derelicts and helping them find shelter.”⁵²

“The Modern Priest and Levite”: Social Responsibility

Henry’s 1947 *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* was a plea for Fundamentalists to repent of their aloofness to the social needs around them. He feared that in his day, conservative Christian churches had become “the modern priest and Levite, by-passing suffering humanity.”⁵³ One of the key reasons Henry stressed social responsibility for the local church was the relationship he saw between ecclesiology and eschatology, particularly with reference to the Kingdom of God.⁵⁴ In summarizing Henry’s “Kingdom ecclesiology,” Russell Moore argues that Henry saw local churches to be “inherently eschatological and soteriological.”⁵⁵ The church, in her proper place in the unfolding Kingdom, does not bear the sword of the state nor the power of legislation. However, she is called to be a balm to societal ills. Because Henry saw the church as the “closest approximation of the Kingdom of God today,” he thought her focus should include that with which God is concerned, including suffering, oppression, and hunger.⁵⁶ Christ’s call to make disciples cannot be divorced from an interest in social responsibility: “We should realize that the Great Commission is dwarfed and even maligned if one implies that God is blindly tolerant of social and structural evil, that he forgives sinners independently of a concern for justice.”⁵⁷ The evangel had a public dimension, and Henry refused to let it be lost in the twentieth century’s

⁵¹ George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 91.

⁵² Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 91.

⁵³ Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 2.

⁵⁴ For a thorough treatment of this subject, see Moore, “The Kingdom of God in the Social Ethics of Carl F. H. Henry.”

⁵⁵ Moore, “The Kingdom of God in the Social Ethics of Carl F. H. Henry,” 396.

⁵⁶ Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself*, 89. His Fourteenth Thesis in *GRA* rings with similar terminology: “The church approximates God’s kingdom in miniature” (Henry, *GRA*, 4:542).

⁵⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, “A Summons to Justice,” *Christianity Today* (July 20, 1992):

obsession with individualism.

While Henry clearly affirmed the church's role in engaging societal needs, he never diminished the primacy of gospel proclamation. He guarded evangelicals from using the political process as a battering ram against cultural mores. In his autobiography, as he evaluated the state of evangelicalism in the mid-1980s, Henry rhetorically asked, "Will not Christians be disillusioned and in fact discredited if by political means they seek to achieve goals that the Church should ideally advance by preaching and evangelism?"⁵⁸ Gospel proclamation, not political efforts, held the power to see lost men and women drawn into the new community through the new birth. He warned that "the new society must not allow democratic political participation to cancel the new society's duty to transcend her own walls and to proclaim in public the claim of divine revelation upon both the Church and the world."⁵⁹ Though political and cultural engagement were important, Henry understood that neither were the power of God unto salvation. This dynamic power was a reality reserved for the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:16).

Henry's Deemphasizing of the *Local*-ness of the Church

This article has argued that Carl F. H. Henry's ecclesiology emphasized regenerate church membership and mission. At this point, it will turn to the second portion of the thesis: that Henry deemphasized the *local* aspects of the church. As mentioned, a key reason for this was Henry's unique agenda. Nonetheless, as a Baptist, it is striking how little attention Henry gives to Baptist distinctives. Arguing that Henry deemphasized these distinctives is not to say that he ignored them altogether. He held the conviction "that Baptist distinctives are valid, and that the Baptist mission in the closing decades of the twentieth century is extraordinarily urgent."⁶⁰ Still, in discussing specific ecclesiological points, Henry remained vague. Throughout his 3,000-page *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Henry only makes passing reference to the ordinances and their place in Baptist ecclesiology. Neither does he fully address polity or church leadership. Henry's goal in *GRA* is to argue for the validity of propositional revelation, so one cannot critique him for failing to elaborate these points.

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⁵⁸ Carl F. H. Henry, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), 394.

⁵⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, "Reflections on the Kingdom of God," *JETS* 35 (March 1992): 48.

⁶⁰ Henry, "Twenty Years a Baptist," 54.

Nonetheless, it is fair to say that while Henry often affirmed the need for Baptist distinctives, his attention to them throughout his catalog is sparse. Indeed, according to Russell Moore, "Baptists will find a more thorough treatment of baptism in the writings of Karl Barth than in those of Carl Henry."⁶¹

To say that Henry did not focus on the nature or work of the local church is not to say that he said *nothing* about the local church. To the contrary, he addressed the importance of preaching and the biblical role of the pastor in numerous ways. In one unpublished sermon entitled "The Work of the Ministry," Henry reminded budding ministers that "those who surmise that preaching has had its day do not know what they say. Gospel preaching is here to stay."⁶² Though not known as an esteemed orator, Henry routinely received letters of thanks regarding his preaching ministry. One pastor told Henry, "The impact of your ministry is still being felt in our church and the community. . . . You also made a significant impact upon the uncommitted people in our congregation. From time to time your statements are quoted in discussions and committee deliberations. The evangelism thrust of our congregation has taken on a new dynamic."⁶³ Further, Henry saw much of his teaching duties to be preparatory work for local church leaders. In his archival papers, Henry left a handwritten presentation entitled "Charge to the Pastor" that he delivered at installation services.⁶⁴ Much of his correspondence is focused on answering theological questions from local church pastors and recommending helpful resources for their ministries.

Still, despite some attention to preaching and pastoral ministry in local congregations, Henry provided no sustained theological reflection upon the ordinances, the biblical case for church membership, qualifications for church elders, or church government. The careful, detailed treatments

⁶¹ Moore, "God, Revelation, and Community," 34.

⁶² Carl F. H. Henry, "The Work of the Ministry," Unprocessed Box, Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Roling Library, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

⁶³ Rev. O. William Cooper to Carl F. H. Henry, 30 November 1978, Box 1978 [Box 1], Folder "Correspondence – Churches, Pastors, and Chaplains," Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Roling Library, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

⁶⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, "Charge to the Pastor," Box 1946–1947, Folder "Charge to the Pastor—Note Cards," Carl F. H. Henry Papers, Roling Library, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois.

that characterized so much of Henry's work are absent in the area of ecclesiological distinctives. Perhaps this is because his co-laborers and guest contributors at *Christianity Today* shared differing views on the subject; for example, at various times he utilized such voices as Geoffrey Bromiley (Anglican), Roger Nicole (Baptist), and James Boice (Presbyterian). He linked arms with these and others because of their commitment to the truthfulness of God's word, not because they advanced a particular ecclesiological agenda. This vision limited Henry's willingness to underscore ecclesiological nuances to the same extent that others have. He was content to refer to the "evangelical church" in the singular, "not referring to any particular denomination but to all conservative Protestants committed to the formal and material principles of the Reformation."⁶⁵ His accent was always placed on the broad swath of churches in the Reformation tradition rather than on a single stream located therein.

Ecclesiological Lessons from Carl F. H. Henry

What can contemporary evangelicals glean from Henry's approach to ecclesiology? First, local church purity matters. Without a regenerate body, the church's mission to a lost world will be hampered. Indeed, as demonstrated in this article, Henry connected Christian ethics with Christian mission: the new society (with a new ethic) was called out into the world yet must remain distinct from the world. If the local body was impure, her voice in the world would suffer. Henry believed that ecclesiological purity begins with regenerate members who "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5:25).

Second, there are appropriate times to traverse ecclesiastical boundaries for Kingdom causes. Henry was a model at this. On a number of issues, complementarians can cooperate with egalitarians, Baptists can collaborate with Presbyterians, and continuationists can coordinate with cessationists. Of course, issues surrounding ordination, ordinances, church membership, and church practice require clear boundaries through church covenants, bylaws, and statements of faith. But on social issues or issues central to the gospel, these groups can champion one another. Henry did not want to lose the good that could come from cooperation at the expense of ecclesiological quarreling.

Finally, there are also weaknesses in Henry's approach. Nathan Hatch, while appreciative of Henry's contributions, also reminds evangelicals that

⁶⁵ Timothy George, "Evangelicals and Others," *First Things* (February 2006): 19.

minimizing ecclesiological distinctives runs the risk of cutting evangelicals off from the "riches" of their denominational traditions.⁶⁶ Broad evangelicalism is at its best when it fosters a passion for the Great Commission among various denominations, while also acknowledging that spiritual formation is designed to ultimately take place within biblical local churches. Those who, like Carl F. H. Henry, champion a wide, trans-denominational evangelical voice must be careful not to see local churches as an impediment to Christian growth, but rather the incubator in which God designed Christian growth to flourish. More attention to local bodies and local spiritual formation will provide the sustainability necessary for broad gospel movements, like Henry's neo-evangelicalism, to survive longer than mere decades. Henry's soaring, universal ecclesiology would have benefited from more explicit connection to the local church.

Conclusion: The Ecclesiological Air-Traffic Controller

This article has argued that Carl F. H. Henry emphasized the areas of regenerate church membership and mission while he deemphasized the *local* aspects of the church. This is due to his specific goal of uniting the evangelical voice in post-WWII America. He aimed to equip believers to better combat deviant theologies that were infiltrating evangelical denominations and churches. Therefore, the vast majority of Henry's efforts were spent on areas that were being undermined by neo-orthodoxy and liberal Protestantism—the doctrine of God, Scripture, and Christology.

However, that is not to say that Henry ignored ecclesiology entirely. His ecclesiological uneasiness was to be found in his hesitancy to champion one ecclesial tradition over and against another, not because he devalued local churches or found them irrelevant. To the contrary, he hoped to see local churches thrive. His 1943 *Successful Church Publicity* attempted to help local churches better permeate their communities using avenues such as television, newspaper, and the radio. Later, while he served at *Christianity Today* in Washington D.C., Henry would spend his week interacting with world-renowned theologians, and then on Sunday morning would walk two miles east to teach Sunday School at Capitol Hill Baptist Church.⁶⁷ As demonstrated above, much of Henry's ministry was focused on serving local church pastors through teaching, preaching, mentoring, and encouragement.

⁶⁶ Nathan O. Hatch, "Response to Carl F. H. Henry," in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990), 99.

⁶⁷ See <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/about-us/our-history/>.

Carl F. H. Henry understood local church leaders to be akin to theological and pastoral mechanics—individuals who adjusted, tweaked, and serviced the airplane on the ground. Their important work allowed the airplane to function as designed. They were responsible to decide what exactly needed to be in place for the vehicle to operate according to their understanding of the biblical blueprints. He left ecclesiological distinctives to them. He saw himself in the role of air traffic controller: helping churches navigate foggy theological skies and ensuring evangelicals of various airlines did not collide mid-air. His role was not more important nor more prestigious; it was simply different. In this, his ecclesiology was calibrated for cruising altitude, where the church soared as a regenerate body of believers who lived on mission.

Carl F. H. Henry concluded his November 11, 1940, pastoral letter to his new congregation with this encouragement: “Isn’t it true in the church, as sometimes at home, that we fail to realize fully the wealth that is ours, and so too often our richest blessings are passed by lightly? When you stop to think of it, don’t you think we can be just a bit proud of our church—and show it?”⁶⁸ Over fifty years later, Henry remained confident, hopeful, and proud of what churches could achieve. In his 1992 address at the Southern Baptist Convention, he reminded his fellow Baptists that it was local churches in local neighborhoods from whence true revival would ultimately emerge:

The way to shape an evangelical counter-culture is not simply to march on Washington, to get involved in the political process at the precinct level, to descend en masse on congressional offices, to engage in public confrontation that the media delight to cover, or to launch boycotts. All such efforts have their indispensable place and time, but they do not nurture a deeply rooted counter-culture. It must rise instead in the churches, in the prayer meetings, in members turning out by the hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands seeking renewal, in so many cars suddenly parked near a local church that the world once again becomes curious about what is taking place in those forsaken sanctuaries, and gives new credence to the rumor that God is alive in the history of our times.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Carl F. H. Henry to Humboldt Park Baptist Church, 11 November 1940.

⁶⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, “The Uneasy Conscience 45 Years Later: The Spiritual Predicament,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 58 (May 1992): 480.