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FAITH, REASON AND SCRIPTURE IN THE
THEOLOGY OF DONALD G. BLOESCH

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Philosophy and Religion
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
David R. Coward

March 1, 1982
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FAITH, REASON AND SCRIPTURE IN THE
THEOLOGY OF DONALD G. BLOESCH

Recommended 3-4-82
(Date)

Ronald Nash
Director of Thesis

Robert K. Johnston

Approved March 17, 1982
(Date)

Edward Gray
Dean of the Graduate College
PREFACE

For this paper, I have chosen a topic in contemporary evangelicalism, a movement which, in many ways, represents the grassroots expression of religion in America today. Characteristic of much evangelical thought is the idea that the essence of true religion is somehow alien to one's (unconverted) humanity. Without challenging any of the basic premises of evangelical theology (except perhaps the ontic value of conversion), I have attempted to point to a direction in theology in which religion and humanity may be regarded in a more unified manner.

As a strong proponent of the evangelical movement and a prolific author, Dr. Donald Bloesch has served as an excellent topic for this study. My thanks are due to Dr. Bloesch for his generous correspondence, without which this project could not have been successfully completed. I would also like to express gratitude to Dr. Robert Johnston for his invaluable advice and suggestions, and to Dr. Ronald Nash, whose administrative talents have guided this student safely through the complexities of university bureaucracy.

Although I have made every attempt to avoid sexist terms
in the text of this paper, it seems that the evolution of the
language has lagged somewhat behind the modern social con-
sciousness, making inescapable the periodic use of the generic
"man" as well as other unfortunate terms. It is my hope,
however, that I have reached a satisfactory compromise between
higher principles and the need to communicate effectively.
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Donald G. Bloesch, an American theologian and seminary professor, is a leading spokesman for contemporary Protestant evangelicalism, a theological position that lies somewhere between fundamentalism and neo-orthodoxy. Heavily influenced by the German theologian, Karl Barth, Bloesch employs a methodology in which theology is based on revelation alone, unsupported by philosophy or the arguments of human reason. For Bloesch, revelation is basically alien to human culture and human thought-forms. Because of this, revelation cannot be comprehended by reason, but only by faith. Bloesch’s view leads to a dichotomy between faith and reason, a dichotomy that ultimately lessens the impact of his theological system in at least three ways. First of all, Bloesch is unable to utilize the insights of secular culture for the benefit of theology. Secondly, Bloesch’s distaste for philosophy results in his inadequate handling of the hermeneutical problem. Finally, Bloesch’s understanding of the alienation between revelation and culture can lead only to the increasing irrelevance of theology in the modern world.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Donald Bloesch and Evangelicalism

Donald G. Bloesch, professor of theology at the Dubuque Theological Seminary (Dubuque, Iowa), is becoming increasingly visible as a leading thinker in the contemporary branch of Protestant Christianity known as evangelicalism. With a major new systematic theology to his credit, Bloesch exerts wide influence within segments of this movement. It will be our purpose in this first chapter to briefly examine the nature of the evangelical movement as a whole in order to place Bloesch within the proper theological context, and thereby provide the necessary groundwork for this study.

Background


The seeds of the evangelical movement can be traced back to a time when an increasing number of conservative Christian leaders became dissatisfied with either of the alternatives offered by the fundamentalist-modernist controversy which dominated theological life in this country throughout most of the early twentieth century. Fundamentalism, on the one hand, was characterized by its rejection of every form of worldliness, its adherence to a strict biblical literalism, and a rigorous personal ethic banning smoking, drinking, dancing, gambling, and any other activity considered to be ungodly. Of fundamentalist ethics, Richard Quebedeaux writes:

Ethics has nothing to do with how a committed Christian treats other people as persons created in the image of God and for whom Christ died.
And human love—not to mention Christ's love—appears to have no real importance in that school of thought.

Another major complaint against fundamentalism was in reference to its emphasis on personal salvation and evangelism to the exclusion of any concern with social action. Ronald Nash points out this particular weakness in the following passage:

... like the young man in the Gospel story, it could be said of fundamentalism, "Yet one thing thou lackest." Fundamentalism had sought to defend

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and preserve God’s message from the inroads of modernism and unbelief. But it had neglected and overlooked the need of projecting that message into the social and intellectual life of the country.  

In addition, the fundamentalist mindset tended to breed intolerance and schism. Says Quebedeaux:

Noted for their general divisiveness and discordance, the fundamentalists, when not fighting the Modernists or Liberals, took sides against the Roman Catholics, secular evolutionists, and most important, they fought unceasingly among themselves.

All of these negative features of fundamentalism, coupled with its blatant anti-intellectual stance, led a growing number of sensitive and intelligent Christian leaders to become disenchanted with this theological alternative.

Liberalism, on the other hand, proved to be an equally unsatisfactory choice. Early in the twentieth century, the older liberalism had begun to be replaced by neo-orthodoxy which, although it later came to have a profound influence on evangelicalism, was nevertheless unacceptable to many conservative Christians for a number of reasons. First, and probably most important, neo-orthodoxy had discarded any traditional notion of biblical inspiration and authority and tended to identify revelation with the events of salvation.

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5 Quebedeaux, p. 9.
history, particularly the Christ-event. In addition, many proponents of neo-orthodoxy downplayed the importance of personal conversion and personal appropriation of the work of Christ in favor of a view that, particularly in Barth, tended toward the universality of grace, and thus emphasized the noetic character of the Christian message over the ontic. The evangelical preference for a traditional view of conversion is evident in Bloesch's following comments on Barth's soteriology:

Barth is adamant that the salvation that Christ procured is complete and needs no supplementation. . . . He will not tolerate any suggestion that salvation must be realized or fulfilled in faith.

. . . I agree with Emil Brunner and Arnold Come over Herbert Hartwell that Barth does not succeed in doing justice to the subjective dimension of salvation or in holding both dimensions in balance. The paradox of salvation is ever again sundered in his emphasis on the objective to the detriment of the subjective.6

A New Alternative

In its attempt to avoid what it considers to be the weaknesses of both fundamentalism and neo-orthodoxy, contemporary evangelicalism presents a third alternative which is in many ways a synthesis of the other two. As evangelicalism has evolved, it has become increasingly influenced

by neo-orthodoxy but has retained the same "fundamentals of the faith" as fundamentalism.

Central to the concerns of evangelical theology is the issue of biblical authority. In their disdain for the biblical literalism and other anti-intellectual tactics of the fundamentalists, the evangelicals fully accept the methods and results of modern biblical criticism but do not see this as posing any threat to faith. New Testament scholar George E. Ladd sums up the evangelical view:

Here is perhaps the greatest miracle of the Bible: that in the contingencies and relativities of history God has given to men his saving self-revelation in Jesus of Nazareth, recorded and interpreted in the New Testament; and that in the New Testament itself, which is the words of men written within specific historical situations, and therefore subject to the theories and hypotheses of historical and critical investigation, we have the saving, edifying, sure word of God.7

Like neo-orthodoxy, Ladd identifies revelation with the salvation events of history, but unlike the former, which sees the Bible at best as indirect revelation and at worst as wrong-headed interpretation of those events, Ladd tends to view the writing of the scripture itself as an historical salvation-event. He thus sees the Bible as a wholly reliable and correct interpretation of the other events, and consequently as the authority for Christian faith.

In addition to biblical authority, evangelicals are concerned with a variety of issues including personal conversion, social justice, and the role of women. More important to this study, however, is the concern of a particular group of evangelicals to which Bloesch belongs. This group of evangelicals supports the view that theology must be self-contained, or self-supporting, and grounded only in revelation. These theologians have moved away from the rationalism of the older orthodoxy and the apologetic systems that a rationalistic theology breeds. Harry Kuitert of the Free University of Amsterdam, a leading European evangelical, writes:

We feel no need to construct a rational system in the style of the great medieval system builders and the brilliant Protestant scholastics. The reason for this is simple: people no longer make use of the traditional, metaphysically rooted, rational concepts. For Christian faith to go back to these would be tantamount to adopting the language of a ghetto or the esoteric language of art.⁸

Bloesch expresses similar sentiments:

... the truth of faith cannot be translated into a finalized, coherent system which denies the mystery and paradox in faith. This is because this truth is suprarational as well as rational. Our human system must always be one that is open to revision in the light of new insights into the Word of God and the human situation. It can never

be a closed, airtight, logically consistent, perfected system of truth.  

Bloesch does recognize the need for an apologetic task, but only for the purpose of answering criticisms and not for proving the truth of the gospel. He asserts:

We should be ready to answer criticisms of faith and also to point out the contradictions within unbelief, though always remembering that our feeble apologetics can, at the most, silence criticism. It cannot of itself positively prepare the outsider to accept Christ...10

It is because authority, for this group of evangelicals, is located within divine revelation rather than within human reason that arguments for the faith have generally fallen into disrepute.

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10Ibid., pp. 286-287.
CHAPTER II

BLOESCH AND BARTH

Bloesch as Barthian

The branch of evangelical theology to which Bloesch subscribes is heavily indebted to the German theologian, Karl Barth. In his book on the evangelical movement, Bloesch writes:

... we believe that Barth must be taken with the utmost seriousness by any theologian of evangelical or Reformed persuasion. Barth is not only the foremost Protestant thinker of this century but also probably the most profound and influential Christian theologian of our age.¹

Although Bloesch has made clear his differences with Barth, we are somewhat justified in considering him to be a Barthian or neo-Barthian. Bloesch often acknowledges his debt, and that of evangelicalism, to Barth, and his dependence upon the latter is especially evident when the question of faith, reason and scripture comes to the surface. Indeed, we cannot properly understand Bloesch apart from a basic understanding of Barth's theological method.

Barth's Revolt Against Liberalism

Barth's own views concerning faith, reason, and scripture developed originally as a reaction against the theology of his educational background and must be understood against this historical setting. As a student, Barth was steeped in the tradition of nineteenth century liberalism, a theology which regarded the Bible as a purely human work, subject to the scrutiny of critical reason.

As heirs of the enlightenment and riders of the tide of scientific revolution, it is hardly surprising that liberalism elevated reason to a place of predominance in theology. Nineteenth century science was dominated by the classical (mechanical) view of nature in which all events are seen as being subject to immutable physical laws. For the liberal theologian, therefore, supernatural events simply did not occur. God did not upset the course of nature with miraculous interventions, instead he worked within nature and was present in all natural events. The emphasis here was on the immanence of God, of whom all of nature was a manifestation. Biblical references to the miraculous were explained by liberals in ways that were compatible with human reason.

Central to liberal theology, in fact, was the effort to make all of Christianity reasonable to the human mind. In his study of Protestant theology, William Hordern summarizes
the liberal programme in this way:

The method of liberalism includes the attempt to modernize Christian theology. The world, liberals argue, has changed radically since the early creeds of Christendom were formulated: this makes the creeds sound archaic and unreal to the modern man. We have to rethink Christianity in thought forms which the modern world can comprehend.²

Most importantly, the liberals of the nineteenth century employed the historical-critical method, a research tool which lent their theological undertakings a credibility which was unprecedented in the history of theology. As the term applies to the field of biblical studies, George Ladd defines historical criticism as "... making intelligent judgments about historical, literary, textual, and philological questions which one must face in dealing with the Bible, in the light of all of the available evidence..."³ The liberals reasoned that since the Bible was a product of human history, the same methods of research must apply to it that apply to all historical documents. The use of historical criticism, in the minds of its liberal adherents, raised the status of theology from the level of metaphysics (which no one had trusted since Kant) to the level of science. Theology could, for the first time since the rise of modern science,


take its place among the sciences, and claim as its rightful home, the university.

Adolf Harnack, one of Barth's mentors and a brilliant exponent of the historical-critical method, viewed metaphysics with a skepticism typical of nineteenth century theology. To his students at the University of Berlin he once remarked:

Had these lectures been delivered sixty years ago, it would have been our endeavor to try to arrive by speculative reasoning at some general conception of religion, and then to define the Christian religion accordingly. But we have rightly become skeptical about the value of this procedure. 4

It was Harnack's intention to construct a theology using only the materials of history. For Harnack, these materials included not only the person and life of Jesus Christ, but also the entire subsequent history of the church. He wrote:

It is true that Christianity . . . had a founder who himself was what he taught--to steep ourselves in him is still the chief matter: but to restrict ourselves to him means to take a point of view too low for his significance. . . . it is, as we shall see, his peculiar greatness to have led men to God, so that they may thenceforth live their own life with Him. How, then, can we be silent about the history of the Gospel if we wish to know what he was? 5

According to Harnack, the biblical texts and the history of


5Ibid., p. 11.
the church represent the effects that Jesus had on those who followed him. It was the job of the theologian-historian, he contended, to apply critical judgment to the materials of history in order to discover the simple essence of the gospel underneath. Said Harnack:

From these circumstances it follows that the historian, whose business and highest duty it is to determine what is of permanent value, is of necessity required not to cleave to words but to find out what is essential.6

Faith is made to be dependent upon reason in liberal theology. Under Harnack's methodology it becomes necessary for faith to await the completion of the historian's task before it can grasp the object of its concern.

But if liberal theology was at home in the university, Barth soon discovered that it was out of place in the church. As a pastor, Barth found that his congregation came every week expecting him to proclaim the word of God to them, and he felt inadequate to this task. The liberal theology of his upbringing was simply not preachable.

Barth struggled with the question of the relationship between the Bible, the sermon, and the word of God. In his search for answers, Barth turned back to the Bible itself, where he discovered that the central theme was the transcendence of God. Speaking of this discovery in retrospect,

6Ibid., p. 13.
Barth remarked:

What began forcibly to press itself upon us about forty years ago was not so much the humanity of God as His deity—a God absolutely unique in His relation to man and the world, overpoweringly lofty and distant, strange, yes even wholly other.7

For Barth, the transcendence, or "otherness," of God meant one thing—that faith was beyond the grasp of human reason. Barth saw the gospel not as something that man could discover on his own, but as something that came down to man from beyond. Barth severely criticized his liberal predecessors for their elevation of human reason:

... [nineteenth century] theology retreated to the epistemology and ethics of Kant rediscovered, and to an interpretation of Luther rediscovered in the light of Kant. Finally, only a small realm remained for the genuine religious experience of the individual. Theology turned into philosophy of the history of religion in general, and of the Christian religion in particular.8

For Barth, then, the central failure of liberal theology was its tendency to allow contemporary thought-forms to dictate the nature and essence of the gospel:

Nineteenth century theology ascribed normative character to the ideas of its environment. Consequently, it was forced to make reductions and oversimplifications, to indulge in forgetfulness and carelessness, when it dealt with the exciting and all-important matters of Christian understanding.9

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8 Ibid., p. 13.
9 Ibid., p. 10.
Faith, Reason and Scripture in Barth

Barth published his ideas in the form of a commentary entitled *The Epistle to the Romans*. In this book, Barth made a sharp distinction between religion, which he saw as man's attempt to reach God through his own efforts (the mistake of liberalism), and the Christian gospel, which was God's act of reaching down to man. Commenting on Paul's own criticism of religion in Romans 1:23, Barth wrote:

"But, on whatever level it occurs, if the experience of religion is more than a void, or claims to contain or to possess or to 'enjoy' God, it is a shameless and abortive anticipation of that which can proceed from the unknown God alone. In all this busy concern with concrete things there is always a revolt against God."¹⁰

The "concrete things" of liberalism were the materials of history and the human judgment that worked with them. Barth saw this as a form of idolatry.

A unique feature of Barth's commentary was its complete lack of reference to historical problems and variant readings in the biblical text. For this reason, the commentary was received with much criticism in the academic world. It was not Barth's intention, however, to deal with the textual problems in Romans, but rather to deal with the theological issues with which Paul dealt. But in spite of his failure

to use historical criticism. Barth never denied the validity of the method. In the preface to the second edition of his commentary, Barth wrote:

I have been accused of being an 'enemy of historical criticism.' . . . I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognize it, and once more state quite definitely that it is both necessary and justified. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary. Recent commentaries contain no more than a reconstruction of the text, a rendering of the Greek words and phrases by their precise equivalents . . . and a more or less plausible arrangement of the subject matter in such a manner that it may be made historically and psychologically intelligible from the standpoint of pure pragmatism.11

Barth went on to spell out his own idea of what a commentary should be:

Now, this involves more than a mere repetition in Greek or in German of what Paul says: it involves the reconsideration of what is set out in the Epistle, until the actual meaning of it is disclosed. It is at this point that the difference between us appears. There is no difference of opinion with regard to the need of applying historical criticism as a prolegomenon to the understanding of the Epistle.12

For Barth, historical criticism was able to deal with the problems of the background, origin, authorship, and dating of the Bible, but was incompetent to deal with its theological content. In his discussion of Barth, William

11 Ibid., p. 6.
12 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
Nicholls comments, "Barth has always spoken of historical criticism with a certain reserve, from his earliest period on. He concedes the intellectual validity of its methods, but doubts the value to faith of what they can yield."\(^{13}\)

The question that arises with regard to Barth's understanding of faith, reason, and scripture is this: If the theological content of the Bible comes to us via the words of the Bible, how can faith be independent of what reason can tell us about the Bible? Barth handled this question with a new understanding of the doctrine of revelation. Unlike orthodoxy, which identified revelation directly with the words of scripture, Barth identified revelation with the events of history to which scripture witnesses. For Barth, God did not give us information about himself in a book, but gave us himself in the person of Jesus Christ. The Bible testifies to the acts of God in history. Revelation is a dynamic event rather than a static property of a book. The present-day proclamation of the church, guided by scripture, is also a witness to the acts of God in history and provides the conditions through which revelation, or encounter with God, can again occur. Nicholls remarks:

By means of this doctrine of revelation Barth

was able to allow for the results of the scientific, or critical, study of the Scriptures, while affirming an authoritative revelation . . . . . faith is directed not to the results of historical criticism, but to the proclamation, in which revelation happens now.14

In later years, Barth broke with his initial emphasis on the radical "otherness" of God's revelation and took up the project of constructing a rational Christian dogmatics that would be totally free of autonomous philosophical speculation and based upon revelation alone. For Barth, philosophy, like religion, was an activity of autonomous human reason and a form of idolatry when directed toward reaching God. Barth felt that liberalism and orthodoxy had both gone wrong in constructing theologies that were heavily dependent upon the thought-forms of their respective cultures. The dogmatics of orthodoxy was little more than metaphysical speculation. Liberalism, on the other hand, steered clear of metaphysics, but had no dogmatics. Barth acknowledged the validity of the scientific methodology of liberalism as opposed to the methodology of orthodoxy, but nevertheless found liberal theology to be strictly an academic enterprise. For Barth, dogmatics should be an activity of the believing church.

It was his own particular view of revelation that made

14 Ibid., p. 99.
dogmatics, or rational talk about God, possible for Barth. According to Barth, revelation is always a miracle, and the central miracle of revelation was the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. For Barth, this meant that God was in Jesus Christ everything that he was antecedently in himself. In the incarnation, God became object for the human subject. To talk about Jesus, therefore, is to talk about God, and conversely, to talk about God means to talk about Jesus. By basing theology squarely upon the historical reality of Jesus, Barth was able to free rational theology from speculative philosophy (human reason) and make dogmatics possible within the context of the believing church (faith).

**Barth and Evangelicalism**

The particular segment of evangelicalism which we might classify as "neo-Barthian" seems to be at the cutting edge of the movement as a whole, and many of the evangelical scholars who sympathize with Barth are particularly attracted by the fact that his is a theology of revelation as opposed to a synthesis between reason, or philosophy, and revelation. Even those who disagree with Barth must come to grips with the fact that he has played a crucial role in making evangelicalism what it is. For theologians on both sides of the fence, the place of Barth is a central issue of evangelicalism today. Gregory Bolich, author of *Karl Barth & Evangelicalism*,

writes the following:

Karl Barth presents to evangelicalism a crucial decision. To accept the man as an example and his theology as a positive resource means to answer the question of evangelical identity in a much different manner than that advocated by Barth's "negative" critics. Barth's acceptance also raises afresh the question of evangelical unity. Will those who grapple with Barth be the victims or perpetrators of division?15

In spite of the risks involved, Bolich's own recommendation is that evangelicals cautiously utilize Barth's contributions in the formation of their own theology:

With the examination of evangelical history as a starting point and the study of Barth as a resource, there remains the task of drawing together those particulars that can strengthen evangelicalism. Peeling away the dross should reveal the inner foundation of the gospel of Christ. Close attention to Barth can help recover the essentials of that gospel. Adding certain features from Barth to the ongoing development of evangelical theology may help consummate important elements that have briefly surfaced at various points in evangelical history. The evangelical presentation of the gospel to this society can be enhanced by Karl Barth. The historical use of his work in this generation may vouchsafe to coming generations a brighter heritage.16

Bloesch is prominent among those who appreciate Barth's contribution to evangelical theology. He writes, "Barth's influence is definitely perceptible in many of my earlier writings. For some time his theological method has elicited


16Ibid., p. 106.
my admiration and support. "1 They will disagree with Barth, he still finds the latter to be helpful:

I have nevertheless always sought to maintain a critical stance, which may disconcert some thoroughgoing Barthians. In some areas of theology Barth has been an invaluable ally and in other areas a useful foil.18

In *The Evangelical Renaissance* Bloesch includes a chapter entitled "A Reassessment of Karl Barth," in which he expresses the importance of using Barth as a guide for doing evangelical theology. In this chapter Bloesch closely identifies Barth's theological enterprise with that of the evangelicals:

First of all it should be said that Karl Barth is himself an evangelical theologian. His little book *Evangelical Theology* with its forthright call for Scriptural authority and personal commitment should be read by all who desire to learn from this great scholar.19

Most of Bloesch's disagreement with Barth is in the area of dogmatics. When it comes to methodology, however, Bloesch is quite appreciative of Barth. For Bloesch, the most significant feature of Barth's methodology is his insistence that evangelical theology be a theology of revelation:

Evangelicals can stand with Barth in his call for a theology of revelation, which he sharply differentiates from philosophical theology and

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17 Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor*, p. 12.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., *The Evangelical Renaissance*, p. 81.
philosophy of religion. A theology of revelation is based upon the word of God in Scripture and not upon human wisdom and imagination.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition, Bloesch shares Barth's assessment of the limitations of historical criticism:

Though Barth accepts the principle of historical or higher criticism, he is adamant that criticism never procures for man the Word of God or the truth of revelation. The most that criticism can do is throw light upon the historical and cultural background of the biblical text or passage. God's word is never available to human reason.\textsuperscript{21}

Bloesch's conclusion is that whether or not evangelicals agree with Barth, it is necessary that they wrestle with the issues Barth presents and take his answers into serious consideration. Bloesch writes:

Barth's contribution to the contemporary theological discussion must be taken seriously. This great theologian cannot be dismissed, for too much of what he says rings true. . . . Our conclusion is that though he does not wholly succeed in holding in balance various emphases in the Bible he is to be reckoned as one of the theological giants of our age and all ages.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., pp. 81-82.

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 100.
CHAPTER III

FAITH, REASON AND SCRIPTURE IN BLOESCH

A Question of Hermeneutics

Two major branches of any evangelical theology are dogmatics and hermeneutics. We might define dogmatics as the systematic exposition of the faith of the believing church and hermeneutics as the method basic to one's interpretation, and the means by which the validity of a system of dogmatics is established. We could also say that hermeneutics is the foundation of dogmatics, and dogmatics is the superstructure of hermeneutics. Because the question of the relationship between faith, reason, and scripture is largely a question of hermeneutics, it is this aspect of Bloesch's theology with which we will be chiefly concerned in this chapter.

Bloesch's major work, the two volume Essentials of Evangelical Theology, is a work of dogmatics, and the reader will find little attention devoted to matters of hermeneutics in these pages. For the latter, it is necessary to turn to an earlier work entitled The Ground of Certainty, in which is found Bloesch's most complete presentation of his own method
of understanding and interpretation.¹ The discussion that follows is based largely on the content of this book.

**Philosophy as Unbelief**

In *The Ground of Certainty* Bloesch defines philosophy as "an attempt to understand man's ultimate questions on the basis of reason."² For Bloesch, reason is not simply the application of formal laws of logic to the data of experience, but rather involves all human cognitive resources, including intuition and imagination as well as intellect. As Bloesch uses the term, "reason" refers to any human resource other than revelation. He states, "Philosophy might also be defined as man's endeavor to find meaning in life on the basis of his own resources."³ With Barth, Bloesch agrees that any such endeavor is doomed to failure because the Christian message contains the meaning of life, and the Christian message is beyond the reach of human resources. It comes down from God who is "wholly other" than human beings. The very existence of human philosophy is tantamount to a denial of revelation. If God has indeed revealed the meaning of life then there is no need to continue in the search for that


²Ibid., p. 83.

³Ibid.
meaning. One needs only to accept God's word gratefully. Bloesch points out that even Plato recognized that a revelation from God would be supremely preferable to the inherent weakness of human philosophy:

I would have him take the best and most irrefragable of human theories, and let this be the raft upon which he sails through life—not without risk, as I admit, if he cannot find some word of God which will more surely and safely carry him.4

Because philosophy takes human reason as its starting point and criteria for truth, philosophers tend either to deny God's existence or reduce him in such a way that he becomes accessible to the scrutiny of man. In either event it is necessary that man elevate himself above God as the ultimate knower and arbiter of truth. Where philosophy does deal with God it invariably deals with him as an abstract concept rather than a living, personal God. Bloesch comments:

Where God is spoken of, He is subsumed under a genus such as being or process. He is the supreme being or the creative process. In Leibniz's philosophy the monad is the chief category, and God is referred to as the supreme monad. Hegel described God as the "highest being" and as "pure abstraction." In naturalistic philosophy God is sometimes envisioned as a dynamic force in nature or as the "personification of the highest social values" (Ames): more often He is simply denied or relegated to insignificance.5

Bloesch objects that such concepts of God stand in sharp


5Bloesch, The Ground of Certainty, p. 67.
contrast to the Christian idea of God as a loving heavenly father. With Kierkegaard he agrees that "Christianity is not a philosophical truth but a living faith that demands passion rather than contemplation."6 Bloesch asserts, "Theology is oriented not about an idea of God but about the God-Man Jesus Christ."7

For Bloesch, philosophy has as its ground of certainty autonomous human reason, which ultimately decides what can and cannot be true. Rationalistic philosophy, which emphasizes human intellect and tends to equate conceptual or propositional truth with ontological reality, has as its final certainty that which is logically compelling to the human mind. In nonrationalistic philosophies certainty may be more directly related to the emotive or intuitive aspects of human reason, such as mystical experience or direct apprehension of the nature of reality. But whatever features of reason are employed in a given philosophy, reason still remains the measure of all things. In contrast to this, Bloesch points out that the ground of certainty for theology is to be found in revelation:

Whereas the truth upheld by philosophers can be discovered or conceived by reason, the truth proclaimed by the church has its source in an author-

6Ibid., p. 70
7Ibid.
itive definitive revelation of God. As Paul averred: "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11,12).  

Autonomous reason cannot submit to the authority of an outside revelation, and because of this, Bloesch equates philosophy with unbelief.

Bloesch does not, however, think that the theologian should ignore or discard philosophy, for he sees much value in its study. Perhaps the chief value is that the study of philosophy helps the theologian to understand his own position by gaining a better understanding of its opposite. Bloesch says:

Let us now consider in what way a knowledge of philosophy can contribute towards a deeper understanding and appreciation of our faith. First it should be said that there can be no full understanding of belief until we see it in contrast to unbelief.  

Bloesch asserts that historically, good theology has involved a firm grasp of non-Christian as well as Christian thought:

The great theologians from Paul and Augustine to G.C. Berkouwer and Karl Barth have had a deep insight into secular thought, and this is why they have been able to explain what the faith does not mean as well as what it means.  

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8Ibid., pp. 88-89.

9Ibid., p. 61.

10Ibid.
This negative use of philosophy can also help Christians weed out of their own thought ideas which have their origins outside of the faith:

... a study of philosophy makes the Christian alive to the heresy that has infiltrated into the church from secular culture. Heresy is a result of the fusion of belief and unbelief. All Christians, to be sure, are slightly heretical in their thinking, but a real danger appears when philosophical values and insights become normative.11

Secondly, Bloesch sees as a positive application of the study of philosophy the increased ability of the Christian to intelligibly communicate the faith to the secular world:

For our witness to the world to be intelligible we must understand not only the content of our faith but also the cultural or ideological situation to which we are speaking. We must also have some awareness of the cultural situation in which the faith has been delivered to us. The cultural situation signifies the philosophical context, the creative thinking of the natural man.12

Finally, Bloesch believes that because of common grace, the secular culture can provide insights that can aid the Christian in understanding or expressing his faith. Bloesch makes it clear, however, that these insights must be reinterpreted in the light of revelation. He comments:

Some secular insights and values can be accepted by the Christian, but they must always be subordinated to the Word of God. Secular categories need to be transformed or "baptized" if they are to serve the

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., pp. 60-61.
Christian witness.  

Bloesch summarizes the role of philosophy for the Christian as follows:

The immediate reason why a Christian should be acquainted with philosophy is that he can understand his faith better. The ultimate reason is that he can make an intelligible and compelling witness to his faith before the world.  

The Doctrine of Revelation

From what has been said so far, it is obvious that Bloesch has little confidence in the use of human reason as a theological tool unless that reason has been informed by divine revelation. This brings us to the question of Bloesch's view of revelation. Because it is central to his theology, an understanding of Bloesch's doctrine of revelation is the necessary groundwork for an understanding of how he views the interplay between faith, reason, and that revelation.

For Bloesch, revelation has a dual nature: it involves both an objective aspect and a subjective aspect. The objective aspect includes the Bible and the historical events that the Bible mirrors, and the subjective aspect consists of the existential encounter with Jesus Christ in the present and the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit in the human heart.

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13Ibid., pp. 61-62.
14Ibid., p. 61.
The foundation of revelation is objective, but its realization is subjective. . . . The experience of faith must always be tested by the objective criterion, the message of the Bible, but the latter must also be verified by the Spirit illumining us from within.15

Bloesch speaks of the Bible as having both human and divine origin. He asserts:

Scripture cannot be rightly understood unless we take into consideration that it has a dual authorship. It is not only a human witness to divine revelation, but it is at the same time God's witness to himself. The Bible is not partly the Word of God and partly the word of man: it is in its entirety the very Word of God and the very word of man.16

Because of the dual nature of the Bible, Bloesch does not identify objective revelation with the words of the Bible as this would deny both its humanity and its historicity.

Bloesch sets his own position over against that of Gordon Clark, who tends to identify scripture with the mind of God:

Clark regards the Bible as a verbal revelation from God: it represents the very mind or thought of God. The Bible is significant because here we find a communication of the thought of God to the mind of man. We do not gain knowledge of God by an empirical encounter of the Bible as a historical record. What the Bible gives is not so much a history of God's dealings with man as information about God.17

Bloesch, like Barth, prefers to identify revelation with God's

15Ibid., p. 73.
16Ibid., Essentials, vol. 1, p. 52.
17Ibid., The Ground of Certainty, p. 183.
direct dealings with man whether these be in history (as are the events of the Bible) or in the present. For this reason, Bloesch claims that scripture "is not in and of itself divine revelation, but when illumined by the Spirit it becomes revelation to the believer." 18 On the other hand, Bloesch does not wish to discredit the objectivity of written revelation. He is equally hard on those who tend to mysticize or spiritualize scripture. To sum up Bloesch's position we could say that without the Spirit, the Bible is not revelation, and without the Bible, the Spirit is not revelation. For revelation to take place, both of these elements must be present. For Bloesch, revelation is an event that involves both an objective message and an existential experience.

Faith and Reason

It is faith which empowers one to believe divine revelation. Faith, like revelation, is not something that one already possesses or can acquire on one's own, but is rather a gift from God. In the event of revelation, the Holy Spirit gives an individual faith in order that he might believe in and appropriate those things which are given him in objective revelation. Bloesch states:

Faith moreover is not an achievement of man but a gift of God. It is an inner awakening given to man

by the Holy Spirit by which he is moved to give of himself in trust and surrender to Jesus Christ. Man believes not on the basis of his own free will but on the basis of the free grace of God.10

For Bloesch, it is necessary that natural reason be converted by faith. When one comes to belief in Jesus Christ through faith, his whole self is converted, including his reason. Bloesch expresses this idea as follows:

Faith is given to man directly from God, but it does not operate independently of reason and the senses. It can be said to convert or redirect our reason. Faith does not overthrow reason but places it on a new foundation. We believe against our reason but not without our reason. When man's will is turned in a new direction, he is then enabled to reason in the light of faith.20

Although Bloesch claims that faith does not overthrow reason, in a very real sense it does just that. The faculty of reason remains intact, but upon conversion it can no longer operate autonomously. Once conversion takes place, all of the functions of reason become subject to the control of revelation. Reason is no longer reason in the original sense (man's own resources) but becomes a subsidiary of faith.

Revelation is not directly accessible to reason but must be mediated by faith. For Bloesch, "faith is the sole means by which one perceives revelation."21 Natural reason cannot

10 Ibid., p. 223.
20 Idem., The Ground of Certainty, p. 188.
21 Ibid., p. 191.
prepare a man to receive faith or to receive revelation.

Bloesch asserts:

... only a despair over one's sins makes one ripe for the gospel. ... Natural knowledge leads to condemnation, not to salvation. ... The natural man is in flight from God, not in quest of God, and this is why he can be reached only by the miracle of divine grace.22

According to Bloesch, there are no reasons for faith other than those reasons given in faith itself. He writes:

Are there reasons for our faith in Jesus Christ? I would reply in the affirmative, but these are reasons which faith itself gives, namely, the witness of the Scriptures, the resurrection of Christ and the assurance of salvation. These are reasons given in revelation itself: they comprise part of the truth of revelation. Such reasons for the faith are not arrived at independently of revelation: they are the evidence which faith itself provides.23

For Bloesch, the Christian believes because Jesus rose from the dead, and he knows that Jesus rose from the dead because the Holy Spirit tells him so, and he knows that it is the Holy Spirit speaking because what he says is that Jesus rose from the dead. Bloesch admits that such reasoning is circular, but insists that "the circular argument should be seen as not really an argument but rather a testimony of faith."24 He adds that the circular argument "tells us that faith can

22 Ibid., pp. 197-198.

23 Ibid., p. 194.

24 Ibid., p. 75.
only stand on its own foundation. Reason must finally abdicate: the natural man must finally make the leap of faith."25

It is not surprising that Bloesch questions the value of apologetics. The tendency of traditional apologetics is to start with the common ground shared by believer and unbeliever, and argue from there to the truth of Christianity. But because the truth of Christianity is suprarational--because it comes down from beyond--there can be no point of contact with non-Christian thought. In addition to this, sin has blinded the eyes of the unbeliever so that he is unable to grasp the truth without the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Of apologetics Bloesch says:

I hold that to appeal to common ground with non-Christian thought is suspect. Apologetics in the traditional sense cannot penetrate the heart of the unbeliever because he is bound to powers and forces beyond his control. If we take seriously the biblical and Reformation doctrine of the bondage of the will, then we must conclude that the outsider or unbeliever could not believe in Jesus Christ even if this were his intention.26

Like philosophy, the chief value Bloesch sees in apologetics is a negative value. The Christian may engage in "apologetic wrestling with the questions of unbelief" in order to strengthen his own faith. It is of little benefit, however, to the unbeliever. Bloesch finds systems of apolo-

25Ibid.

26Ibid., p. 108.
getics to be inconsistent with a theology of revelation, the sort of theology that Bloesch would like to construct. He writes:

But the Christian revelation stands in diametrical opposition to the thought-world of the natural man and this is why the Christian, although he can cooperate with unbelievers in many areas (e.g., social welfare), cannot by rational argument persuade them of the credibility of his faith.27

Although The Ground of Certainty was written more than ten years ago, Bloesch has remained in basic agreement with his earlier view of the relationship between faith, based on revelation, and human culture, based on autonomous reason. In a recent letter he has written:

... I claim that the content and object of our faith transcend our culture, though our terminology and thought-forms are drawn from the culture. ... I reject Tillich's method of correlation because it supposes that there is common ground between the beliefs and values of the culture and divine revelation. Revelation invades human culture and transforms it; it does not blend into it or harmonize with it.28

Here Bloesch summarizes quite well what he has said in his earlier book—namely, that the Christian revelation stands in fundamental opposition to the thought-forms of human reason. Revelation enters human culture as an intruder and redirects human thought. Reason may gain an understanding

27 Ibid.

of faith only after it has been converted by faith, and then
only in the light of the objective revelation in scripture.
CHAPTER IV

AN ASSESSMENT OF BLOESCH'S POSITION

The Strength of Bloesch's Theology

Although Bloesch's theology does not prove to be fully satisfactory for reasons which we shall go into later, there are several strong points in his theology which deserve mention here. First of all, Bloesch acknowledges the cultural conditionedness of the Bible, thereby avoiding the fundamentalist error of regarding the Bible as being directly addressed to humans in the twentieth century. Bloesch stresses the need to realize that the Bible is a product of its times:

... it is possible and necessary to affirm that the spirit accommodated the truth of the Gospel to the mind-set and language of the writers. They were both children of their times and prophets to their times ... ¹

Because of the cultural and historical limitations of the Bible, it is to Bloesch's credit that he emphasizes the need to translate its concepts into the language of today in order for its message to be understood.

In addition, Bloesch's theology entails a dynamism which is absent from the static categories of fundamentalist thought. His emphasis throughout is on the personal nature of the relationship between God and man. At the same time, he refuses to undercut the significance of the propositional element. This can be seen in Bloesch's claim that revelation involves both personal encounter with God and the message of scripture. Always striving to maintain a proper theological balance, Bloesch's dynamic view of revelation leads him to assert that the Bible both is and is not to be directly identified with revelation. He writes, "While it is important to underscore the inseparability of the biblical text and divine revelation, one must not make the mistake of equating them." In the next paragraph Bloesch continues:

Yet we must go on to affirm that Scripture is more than a human witness to revelation: it is revelation itself mediated through human words. It is not in and of itself divine revelation, but when illumined by the Spirit it becomes revelation to the believer. At the same time it could not become revelation unless it already embodied revelation, unless it were included within the event of revelation. Bloesch concedes the ambivalence of this view and admits that the doctrine of scripture is a "paradox." The notion

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2 Ibid., p. 52.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 75.
of paradox is an important element of Bloesch's thought and appears often in his writings. Bloesch's use of paradox does not reflect an inability on his part to commit himself to one view or another, but rather seems to be an honest expression of the limitations of human theological thought, and an adequate way of describing certain features of our experience, particularly religious experience.

Another positive aspect of Bloesch's theology is that he seeks to be relevant to the contemporary world both in the theology he expresses and in the issues to which he addresses himself theologically. No stranger to the arena of modern and post-modern thought, Bloesch presents his readers with a plethora of contemporary names and ideas, obscure and otherwise, as he seeks to map out the territory of truth. One cannot help but admire the scope of this scholar's knowledge of issues and trends. While many theologians of the evangelical and Reformed traditions seem overly concerned with issues which belong to a cultural and philosophical milieu which no longer exists, Bloesch manages to maintain a careful balance between a deep commitment to church tradition and the need for contemporary relevance.

**Some Criticisms**

In conclusion I would like to point out some areas of weakness which ultimately detract from the overall success
of Bloesch's theological enterprise, areas which are all closely related to one another.

The first weakness involves Bloesch's basic distrust of autonomous reason and cultural ideas. Because of Bloesch's conviction that revelation and human reason are basically alien to one another, he forfeits the opportunity to utilize certain cultural insights, on their own terms, for the benefit of theology. As a result, theology is impoverished and Bloesch succeeds only in alienating himself from the culture to which he seeks to be relevant. Related to this is the notion that theology belongs only within the community of the believing church. With Barth, Bloesch agrees that theology as practiced in the university is merely an academic exercise and has little relevance to faith. The theological method of autonomous reason is irrelevant to faith and the theological method of faith is irrelevant to autonomous reason. The idea of faith operating under its own independent methodology leads only to further irrelevance in theology. It seems that the German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, offers a more creative alternative here. In his book on Pannenberg, Don Olive writes:

In Pannenberg's discussion of the relation of reason to faith, he insists upon a type of dialectical or complementary relationship between the two. Faith is not a means to knowledge, revealed or otherwise, but rather a disposition toward God based upon the probability of certain
For Pannenberg, there is only one way of thinking and knowing: only one universal method that must apply across the board to all things, including theology. Olive points out that Pannenberg's approach brings the good news of the Christian gospel into the public arena and opens an avenue of approach between the church and modern man. He concludes:

Whether the church can or will adopt Pannenberg's approach with its resultant lack of certainty is not a question that can be answered quickly or easily. It is just possible that in this nonauthoritarian age the church will have to take some such exposed position in order to be relevant to its task and true to its nature.

Another point at which Bloesch's particular understanding of faith and reason weakens his theology is in the area of biblical hermeneutics. Bloesch simply fails to deal adequately with the hermeneutical problem. Any theologian who maintains, as Bloesch certainly does, that the Bible has something to say to us in the present must deal with the problem of how one is to understand the relevance of ancient concepts in the context of a changed cultural situation. Bloesch is quite aware of the cultural problem and acknowledge:


6Ibid., p. 99.
edges the need to translate biblical concepts into contemporary terms. He writes:

We see the hermeneutical task in a series of stages. First, one must come to the Bible with an open heart and a searching mind. . . . Going on to the second stage one must now examine the text critically, and this means using the tools of literary and historical criticism. He must seek to ascertain what the writer actually intended. He must try to discern the cultural matrix in which the text was written. 7

Bloesch is clear as to how we are to accomplish the first half of the hermeneutical task--namely, how we are to ascertain the original meaning of the scriptures for the original hearers. We are to use literary and historical criticism, the tools of human reason. Bloesch goes on to point out that there is a second half to the hermeneutical task, as well:

Finally, the interpreter must relate the text, now understood in the light of Scripture itself, to the cultural situation of his time. He must translate the theological meaning of the text into the language and thought forms of modern man so that his hearers are presented with a coherent and intelligible message. 8

It is at this final stage of the hermeneutical task that Bloesch's theology lets us down, for he does not leave us with a clue as to how we are to accomplish the task which he has presented. Although Bloesch often mentions the use

8Ibid.
of culture and philosophy as tools by which the meaning of faith may be expressed, it is uncertain whether he is willing to back this up. The overall direction of Bloesch's theology certainly seems to preclude the use of the tools of human reason in determining the contemporary meaning of the biblical text, even in the same way that they may be used to discover its original meaning. Many evangelical theologians who are currently working on the problem of biblical hermeneutics are utilizing insights from such secular sources as contemporary philosophies of science and language in order to understand the nature and meaning of the scriptures. Bloesch, however, excludes himself from this group, claiming that he has "real difficulties with those who try to amplify the meaning of the Scriptural text by means of a secular philosophy . . . ."\(^\text{9}\)

Apparently Bloesch does not take the hermeneutical problem as seriously as do certain of his other evangelical colleagues, for he effectively bypasses the whole question with a premature and somewhat unfair appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit in making known the contemporary meaning of scripture. Bloesch states, "While revelation is received into a particular historical situation, it is not received by the power and insight of human reason but by the special illumination of the Holy Spirit which transforms the

\(^9\)Bloesch, personal letter.
situation. For Bloesch, any ordinary layman who approaches the scriptures with a sincere heart may more readily grasp their meaning by the help of the Holy Spirit than the most sophisticated scholar who approaches the Bible only with his critical tools:

The simplest believer who comes to the Bible emptied of his own understanding and truly seeking the will of God for his life will discover what the Bible is really saying more quickly than an exegete trained in the latest biblical scholarship who nevertheless tenaciously clings to his own preconceptions. It is hardly self-evident, however, that the Holy Spirit automatically overrules our normal thought processes when it comes to matters of devotion, as Bloesch seems to suggest here. Perhaps this is an area in which Bloesch limits himself unnecessarily. Many other evangelical theologians are of the opinion that we can and must use whatever tools of reason are available to us in the final stage of the hermeneutical task.

Anthony Thiselton, a British evangelical, writes of Barth (whose attitude in this matter closely parallels that of Bloesch) the following:

Barth's starting-point is in accord with the outlook of Pauline and Johannine theology. The Holy Spirit is active in interpreting the word of

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10 Ibid.

God to men. However, Barth's opposition to the emphasis of Schleiermacher and Ritschl on religious experience, together with his stress on the sovereign transcendence of God, has led him beyond this starting-point, so that at times it seems to be implied that the Spirit's communication of the Word of God is somehow independent of all ordinary processes of human understanding.\textsuperscript{12}

The same criticism certainly applies to Bloesch. Thiselton cites other noted theologians who would disagree with Barth and Bloesch on this issue:

Heinrich Ott and Wolfhart Pannenberg also reject this view of the work of the Holy Spirit. Ott examines the objection that "one should not concern oneself so much about the problem of understanding, since the Holy Spirit surely sees to it that the message is understood. This 'pious' objection, designed to make light of the hermeneutical problem, is quite popular." The objection, Ott replies, rests on a kind of "inferior orthodoxy" that fails to see the issue: "One should not degrade God to a deus ex machina. Actually . . . the witness of the Spirit is taken fully into account in the concept of understanding, when the concept is itself correctly understood."\textsuperscript{13}

Wolfhart Pannenberg makes a similar point about a doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the context of wider questions about truth and the role of argument. He writes, "An otherwise unconvincing message cannot attain the power to convince simply by appealing to the Holy Spirit. Argument and the operation of the Spirit are not in competition with each other." . . . In other words, the Spirit is conceived of as working through these means, not independently of them.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 90.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., pp. 90-91.
Thiselton concludes that "the Holy Spirit may be said to work through human understanding, and not usually, if ever, through processes which bypass the considerations discussed under the headings of hermeneutics."\textsuperscript{15} Bloesch certainly does not share this conclusion as is evidenced by his tendency throughout to create a dichotomy between autonomous human reason and the interaction between faith and the Spirit. His disdain for the hermeneutic enterprise is clearly rooted in this dichotomy as Bloesch insists that culture and reason be subjected to the judgment of revelation and not \textit{vice-versa}.

Perhaps the whole issue of understanding the biblical text could be better thought of as a dialectical or circular process in which we approach the text armed with the only tools we have—namely, our reason and our cultural outlook, and examine the text critically, only to be transformed by what we discover. Then, having a new understanding of both ourselves and our critical tools, we reexamine the text, only to be re-transformed, and so forth. Thiselton likes to speak of the hermeneutical process as a "spiral." He states:

Although it has now become a fixed and unalterable technical term in hermeneutics, the phrase "hermeneutical circle" is in one respect an unfortunate one. For although the center of gravity moves back and forth between the two poles of the interpreter and the text, there is also an ongoing movement and progressive understanding which might

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 62.
have been better conveyed by some such image as that of the spiral.\textsuperscript{10}

But whatever imagery one chooses, it seems that this way of viewing the hermeneutical process as mutual interaction between the reader and the message of the text avoids the danger of a concept of revelation which is alien to the nature of human understanding, while not undercutting the significance of the role of the Holy Spirit.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In the final analysis, Bloesch's theology is offensive to our natural way of thinking (as he will readily admit), and rests ultimately upon an appeal to the Holy Spirit at the expense of the value of human reason and human achievement. Perhaps this can be traced to Bloesch's strong pietistic background. In any case, Bloesch's distaste for the contemporary hermeneutic enterprise with its emphasis on secular insights could exclude him from what may very well turn out to be one of the most creative and rewarding chapters in the history of theology. Finally, Bloesch's polemical attitude toward human culture and autonomous thought can lead only to the increased isolation of the Christian church from the world of man.

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 104.
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