

Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 288 pp. pbk, \$19.99 ISBN 978-0-8010-3570-8. John D'Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 271 pp. hbk. ISBN 978-0-19-534167-6 \$45.00

Persons wishing to research the re-emergence of American evangelical Christianity in the post-WWII era must very early on reckon with two 'pillar' monographs which dominate the landscape. George Marsden's *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (1987) and Joel Carpenter's *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (1997) cover this era so capably (the second in clear reliance upon the first), that aspiring researchers must provide a warrant for visiting this terrain again. Researchers could, of course, call into question or seek to overturn judgments made in these landmark treatments. The two volumes under review attempt nothing so revisionist; they instead aim at the fuller elaboration of themes observable in the earlier landmark works. Let us consider these in turn, giving precedence to the more general volume of Rosell.

Of the many investigations of the wider influence of Westminster Seminary and its alumni over the eighty years of its existence, this reviewer is unaware of any to date which have explored the influence of the seminary upon broad American evangelicalism. Here is an important story that needs to be explored since the very early years of the seminary saw an existing student body (including persons from that broad American evangelical constituency) follow Dr. J. Gresham Machen from Princeton to the new institution at first situated on Philadelphia's Pine Street. It has reflected no meanness of spirit that those writers who were intent on sketching out the events which led to the formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church or the eventual Bible Presbyterian Church (and its derivatives) have concentrated upon those theological graduates who were determined after 1936 to break with existing denominational structures and build new conservative Reformed churches.

But this was never the whole story; it has always been admitted that early alumni of the seminary labored in additional settings. We are therefore indebted to Dr. Garth Rosell of Gordon-Conwell Seminary for his labors to highlight the era in which a promising young W.T.S. graduate of 1930, Harold John Ockenga, rapidly rose to become a figurehead in the mid-twentieth century resurgence of American evangelical Christianity. The trajectory followed by Ockenga after his graduation led him successively into roles of assistant to Clarence Edward McCartney of First Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, of pastor of that city's Point Breeze Presbyterian Church and from 1936 of Boston's historic Park Street Church. Here was a trajectory which could not have been more distinct from those seminary alumni whose ministries were soon characterized by the enduring of censure and marginalization. While unambiguously a conservative evangelical, Ockenga sidestepped these Presbyterian denominational controversies with his departure from Pittsburgh for Boston. (Though serving a Congregational church, he retained his standing as a PCUSA minister). Alumni friends may have encountered hardships as they supported the stand taken by Professor Machen regarding the Independent Board for Presbyterian Foreign Missions; however Ockenga was a non-separatist conservative evangelical riding a trajectory that seemed to rise always upward.

Rosell's aim, however, is not simply to relate Ockenga's meteoric rise to national influence as a leader of American evangelicalism by the late 1930's; it is to argue that his career trajectory was unfolding in an era in which a national religious awakening would emerge both in New England and nationally. This awakening was helped forward, regionally, through the agency of the collaborative 'New England Fellowship' (in the affairs of which Ockenga was soon caught up) and nationally through the rise of a coterie of young itinerant evangelists, the best known of which was Billy Graham (and among which was numbered the biographer's own beloved father, Merv Rosell).

It was then, from this Boston ‘aerie’ that Ockenga was in rapid succession drawn into prominent roles in conjunction with the eventual founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (1942-3), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947), the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950), and *Christianity Today* magazine from its founding in 1956. Ockenga, raised a Methodist and a graduate of Indiana’s Taylor University, was always the man of broad sympathies who set the unity and growth of the American evangelical movement ahead of the interests of any particular denomination. Yet the question must still be asked, “What can we find here that we cannot read in Marsden and Carpenter?”

We are Rosell’s debtors in two particular respects. First, there has been no serious biographical treatment given to the life and career of Ockenga (1905-1985) since the (arguably) premature effort of Harold Lindsell, *Park Street Prophet* (1951). Until some researcher gives us a full-length treatment of Ockenga’s career and impact, Rosell’s superb treatment – mined from the very extensive archive Ockenga left to Gordon-Conwell Seminary – is the best thing we have. Second, Rosell has shown us much more compellingly than did Joel Carpenter, that the aggregate effect of the aggressive city-wide evangelistic crusades in the period extending from 1945-1960 (in which his own father was a not-insignificant figure) constituted a substantial religious awakening. The clearer recognition of the significance of this era, only a half-century from us in time, might well serve to hearten concerned observers today.

One may, however, ask whether Rosell’s attempt to link this compelling post-WWII-era story to a history of spiritual awakening in New England 1730-1850 in his introductory first chapter does not raise more questions for the reader than it resolves. (There is little doubt that Ockenga accepted the link.) Furthermore, one is made to ask whether Ockenga as depicted by Rosell is as complex a figure in his relations with Fuller Seminary as when depicted by Marsden. One comes away from reading the latter’s depiction of Ockenga’s role vis-à-vis Fuller Seminary in the fifteen years following its 1947 foundation with the distinct impression that his acceptance

of the twice-offered permanent residential role as Fuller president (he instead served twice in a non-residential capacity) would have fundamentally altered the theological direction of that young institution. After all, he himself had been the primary recruiter of the young Ph.D. graduates of Harvard and Boston University which dominated the early Fuller faculty.

These individuals, like Ockenga, carried with them to the opposite coast the double hope that America in general, and the mainline denominations in particular, could be influenced for evangelical Christianity – an evangelical Christianity which when carefully articulated by believing scholars would be taken seriously by the learned academy. Biographer John D’Elia suggests that no individual in the Boston circle recruited by Ockenga for the new Pasadena campus more fully embodied these aspirations than the New Testament scholar, George Eldon Ladd.

D’Elia has plainly invested more than a decade of investigation in Ladd (1911-1982), his former teacher. Fuller Seminary itself made precious archival materials relative to Ladd’s career available to D’Elia while those of Ladd’s remaining former colleagues at Fuller were also free in offering recollections. Surely, as D’Elia proposes, Ladd *does* represent the yearning of American evangelical scholars at mid-twentieth century to be taken seriously by the wider academic community. Just how apt is the biography’s title, “A Place at the Table”, is borne out by this tale of the struggle of the former New England Baptist pastor, graduate of the then-Gordon College of Theology and Missions, Gordon Divinity School, and (eventually) Harvard University to engage with the world of New Testament scholarship as a peer.

Yet the detective work in which D’Elia has long engaged sometimes rankles. An extended first chapter, which describes formative influences, serves notice that a virtual psycho-historical approach will be taken towards understanding the life of the subject. A troubled relationship with his father, a gangly physique which left him in the shadow of a more athletic brother (and made him the butt of adolescent ridicule), and a marriage to an outspoken woman

three years his senior, is all very interesting. In the hands of a psychiatrist trained also in historical disciplines, this data might well have yielded something very insightful. But in the hands of a religious historian lacking that clinical preparation, it produces something quite distinct: a biography fraught from its earliest pages with a kind of ‘determinism’ according to which it is only a matter of time until the subject’s ‘wheels fall off’. It is not too much to say that many individuals have overcome obstacles as great, and gone on to be entirely exemplary Christian individuals. That Ladd proved not to be entirely exemplary we must explain by reference to contingencies more complex than those D’Elia has identified.

Yet it is enough that D’Elia has shown us that by the time Ladd transitioned in 1950 from a Boston pastorate and part-time lecturing at Gordon College to Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, it was already more than clear that this was a man ‘driven’ to excel in his teaching, his research and writing. He had something to prove – and that something was that evangelical New Testament scholarship could engage serious questions critically, and – in time – be taken seriously beyond the boundaries of evangelicalism.

One stands in admiration of the Ladd who at mid-life, mapped out a program of writing on NT subjects which would serve initially to disentangle American evangelicalism from the former dispensational dominance and pave the way for a major work on NT eschatology meant to be taken seriously beyond an evangelical readership. Yet one cringes to learn of the colossal ‘toll’ which this research and writing program exacted on Ladd’s marriage and fatherly responsibilities. D’Elia makes much also of the psychological ‘toll’ exacted on Ladd when the University of Chicago N.T. scholar, Norman Perrin (author of his own just-released volume on NT Eschatology) savaged his *Jesus and the Kingdom* in a 1965 review. D’Elia suggests that thereafter Ladd’s writing was deliberately intended only for a more uniformly evangelical readership. Of a fragile mental constitution, Ladd nevertheless went on to write numerous texts still referred to, all the while convinced that he had failed miserably to show that evangelical NT

study could be carried out with rigor. Without his realizing it, Ladd – in spite of a life progressively marked by serious brokenness – would still serve as a model for younger scholars who aimed high in their own NT study.

Again, however, it is fitting to ask “What is here that we cannot read in Marsden and Carpenter?” Ladd, never more than a minor figure in these earlier volumes, is at center stage in D’Elia’s portraiture. While there is a certain legitimacy to this strategy of using Ladd as ‘lens’ for understanding the mid-century evangelical passion to secure the approbation of the wider academy, it may still be asked whether the aspiration or the ‘angst’ Ladd experienced was so uniquely his own. Marsden indicated that similar aspirations and crushing disappointments were experienced by Ladd’s colleague, the apologist, Edwin John Carnell, when reviewers panned his volume *Christian Commitment* (1957). In sum, D’Elia’s attempt to amplify this aspect of a story previously told by Marsden, delivers a stirring and instructive tale – yet one which sometimes is lacking in proportion.

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