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BOOK REVIEWS

Cruciform Life or Cruciform Church?[1]

Michael R. Weed

Review of Leonard Allen's *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World.* Abilene: ACU Press, 1990, 184 pages and index.

Readers familiar with Leonard Allen's other books will not be surprised to know that *The Cruciform Church* is a very good book. It is well-researched, introduces the reader to a wealth of material, and follows a coherent plan and argument. Like Allen's other works, it is written in a clear and flowing style. *The Cruciform Church* is a serious book with serious implications—both theoretical and practical—and it deserves to be taken seriously.

The Cruciform Church attempts to familiarize readers in Churches of Christ with their past with a view (a) toward greater self-understanding, and (b) toward "appropriating our past," in order (c) to recover a truly biblical theology, viz., a theology of the cross. At the very least, this calls for several shifts of emphasis; at most, it calls for a major redirection for Churches of Christ. Among these is a shift away from preoccupations with doctrine narrowly defined and movement toward a focus on the Christian life. The scheme of the book offers a framework in which Allen covers a number of important issues and presents a wide range of insightful material.

While I am in substantial agreement with the main theses of *The Cruciform Church*, I would argue that the lasting value of the book may be in the issues it raises (intentionally and unintentionally) for Christian reflection.

The first two chapters raise several closely related questions—both methodological and theological—regarding "our tradition." First, how do we identify our tradition? We know what Lutheran and Reformed traditions are, and similarly we can identify the Anglican and Orthodox traditions.

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How do we identify our tradition—whom do we cite as representative? Do we cite those who represent the best thinking of a few? Or the broadest and most popular—and perhaps the shallowest—thinking of many? Sermon books and lectureships may give some kind of indications of the movement but they also reflect political, financial, and prudential concerns. They are not necessarily theological mirrors.

Allen notes that N. B. Hardeman failed to distinguish between Calvin and Calvinism (p. 8). This is an important distinction. Calvinism after the Synod of Dort may disclose tendencies latent in the thought of John Calvin, but it certainly may not be used without qualification to interpret the reformer's views. Are similar distinctions between founders (e.g., Campbell), second-generation thinkers, and systematizers or scholastics ("Campbellism") in our movement warranted, possible, or helpful? (Allen makes some distinctions but it is not clear whether he does so consistently or what weight he gives them.) Unless we can agree on some such distinctions we are left with clashing and jarring versions or fabrications of our tradition constructed by both hagiographers and revisionists. While I have confidence in Leonard Allen's scholarship, I confess some question regarding whether all his sources are representative, or, rather, what they represent.

Second, the phrase "appropriate our past" (pp. 13,14) raises a question. What does it means to "appropriate"—much less "correct" (p. 14)—our tradition? Clearly this presumes some criteria of appropriation and correction.

This may mean a return to the foundational beliefs and convictions in order to correct later aberrations and call a tradition back to earlier commitments. This kind of "appropriation," for example, would call Lutherans back to Luther's understanding of *sola fide*, Calvinists back to the sovereignty of God, or Methodists back to Wesley's doctrine of perfection.

On the other hand, for Lutherans rejecting Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*, Calvinists rejecting Calvin's understanding of the sovereignty of God, and Methodists rejecting Wesley's doctrine of perfection, "appropriation" of these respective traditions would mean salvaging bits and pieces of the tradition eclectically or according to criteria derived elsewhere.

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To my knowledge, the former approach is usually called "recovery" and "appropriation" is reserved for the latter. It is my impression, however, that Allen actually intends the former, i.e., recovering our tradition (he can speak of "preserving the ideals," p. 14); but this is not made satisfactorily clear. A major part of the difficulty here is in identifying exactly what is the theological center of our movement—as a *theological* movement.

And this occasions a third question, viz., are we and, if so, in what sense are we a "theological tradition"? Allen suggests that the

> ability to rattle tight little cages, to shake up settled, moribund traditions, has been the greatest strength of the Stone-Campbell heritage as it has come down to present-day Churches of Christ (p. 21).

Elsewhere, we read that the "highest ideal of the Restoration movement" has been a "readiness to test our traditions and read the Bible afresh" (p. 74; see also 24). And Allen can cite the ideal of restoration of New Testament Christianity as a powerful ideal that has shaped our identity and calls us back to the center and source of faith (p. 125).

It seems to me that these "ideals" are simply very broad orientations that any number of different groups could subscribe to with little change. In addition to constituting a semi-iconoclasm, none of this properly constitutes a "theological tradition." (And Allen certainly does not make that claim.)

My sense of it is that it is much easier to identify us historically and sociologically than theologically. One suspects that it is due to the lack of a clearly definable and functional theological tradition that we now see ourselves struggling within a rapidly secularizing and pluralizing society—and church. In fact, this may drive Allen's own concerns that we seek "continuity with our past" and "maintain our sense of identity" (p. 14). Obviously, however, this is not as easily done as said. We cannot simply manufacture our past—whether as hagiographers seeking to validate it or as reconstructionists seeking to use it as a foil ultimately to invalidate.

Finally, I have two "soft criticisms" principally regarding the first two chapters. First, I have reservations about the ways in which

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the book presents and criticizes "the tradition." While I agree with much of the criticism, the manner of presentation may be off-putting to many readers and may weaken the argument of the book, particularly in light of the author's warning that we not "twist and bend the past to serve our present concerns" (p. 10).

Four examples illustrate the way in which the tradition is dealt with. There is a tendency to recognize foibles occurring among us with the suggestion that they are due to our theological errors. For example, we are told our sense of "historylessness" has "caused us to approach history as polemics and as hagiography" (p. 6). Consequently, "Our leaders were larger-than-life figures, religious geniuses, people who never mixed eternal truth with temporal clay" (pp. 6,7).

To the extent this description is accurate, I suggest the problem is not particularly a Restoration failing but merely a human failing. Having attended a Presbyterian seminary, served as a teaching assistant in a Methodist seminary, and grown up near a Lutheran college, I know from experience that this is not a failing peculiar to our own tradition.

Further, this has not been the experience of many. We were told that we were not Campbellites. We seldom heard of Alexander Campbell. He was significant as one of many men who said, "Let's go back to the Bible." At Abilene Christian University twenty-eight years ago, Restoration history was not required for Bible majors. Men such as LeMoine Lewis and J. D. Thomas regularly asserted that each generation had to go back to the Bible.

As a second example, we are told (p. 102) that Campbell's rationalism (or "analytical-technical" mind set) prevented him from understanding Jesus' metaphor that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved (Mark 10:25, 26). Campbell sought to rationalize the metaphor and explain it by relating it to small security doors protecting cities from marauding Arabs.

This is a very unhappy example for Allen's point—which may be correct but surely not on the basis of this illustration. The interpretation Campbell relates dates back at least to the 11th century (well before the Enlightenment and Baconian rationalism). Calvin, Cyril

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of Alexandria, Jerome, and Clement of Alexandria all tried to explain this saying away—and Mark tells us that even the disciples were "astonished" (Mark 10:26). In fact, a case could be made that this example illustrates Campbell's own interest in an historical approach to Scripture. [2]

Further, on at least one occasion the argument appears to assume the point to be proven. We are told

> Lard and numerous other second-generation leaders hardened Campbell's Baconian rationalism, pushing it to dogmatic lengths that Campbell, with his passion for unity, had resisted (p. 29).

What we are told is that Campbell did not go to the dogmatic lengths of his later systematizers. Nothing is presented to substantiate the conclusion that this was due to his "passion for unity." It would seem equally possible that Campbell's own hermeneutic prevented him from going to "dogmatic lengths" because he was not the Baconian logician he has been portrayed to be. Baconian rationalism may be more of a feature of later "Campbellism" (e.g., James Lamar) than of Campbell's own thought.

Finally, one wonders why, in a book attempting to familiarize readers with the Restoration tradition and to appropriate/recover it, significant opportunities are neglected to do just that. Allen's endorsement of literary and historical criticism (chapter three) provides a clear occasion to cite Campbell's own interests in that regard. Unfortunately, Allen presents Campbell as a Baconian logician and quotes him saying that the "Bible is a book of facts" analogous to nature (p. 28). Actually, Campbell goes on to say that the Bible is a book of *historical* facts and that four-fifths of the Bible consists of writings of history and prophecy. [3] This enables Campbell to argue that the Bible must be interpreted "according to the same code of laws and principles of interpretation by which other ancient writings are translated and understood . . ." [4] Further, in Campbell's rules of interpretation, he not only commends attention to the historical circumstances of the text and to philological principles; he also states that one must attend to the "tropes" (literary and rhetorical forms) used in the Bible.[5]

In other words, regardless of whether Campbell is consistent,

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he can be quoted in support of literary and historical approaches to Scripture—and in support of Allen's own concern to employ literary and historical critical methods in reading the Bible as also constituting a recovery of early Restoration approaches.

Again, I point out these instances not because I am opposed to criticizing our tradition, nor because I necessarily disagree with many of Allen's particular criticisms. Rather, I'm afraid that the argument in places overreaches itself.

The second "soft criticism" addresses Allen's comments encouraging us to care enough about our tradition not to abandon it (pp. 13,14). I have read and puzzled over these pages and I conclude that they are primarily directed to those discouraged with "our tradition" and are meant to exhort them to "hang in." Unfortunately, as far as I can tell, they offer no positive rationale for doing so. And, in reality, people *can* walk away from religious traditions as they can from political parties, families, and marriages.

Ultimately there must be something fundamentally valid in a theological sense (dare one say "true") about a theological tradition in order for one to prefer it over other theological options. It is not enough to say that it is difficult to make changes and that everyone has to be somewhere, so hold on.

Chapter three is arguably the methodological center of the whole book. Here it is suggested that literary/historical criticism is the instrument with which we can correct the faults of our post-Enlightenment, Baconian, scientific hermeneutic and recover the biblical text. More precisely, these methods enable us to recover a sense of mystery as well as the Bible's central message. The latter, in turn, provides a biblically grounded theological standard or set of criteria for correcting our own tradition.

While I am largely in agreement with this chapter, particularly the concerns to recover a sense of mystery, to identify a biblically based theological center, and to recover the Old Testament (particularly Psalms) and the Gospels for the life of the church, there are problems with the way this is all stated.

First, it is more than a little ironic (given all that has been said about the impact of the Enlightenment on Restoration thinking) that Allen is not really abandoning a scientific model. Rather, he is

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shifting from one scientific model to another. Further, although literary and historical methods of interpretation (and they are separate disciplines and should be clearly distinguished) have long histories, they are (as now practiced) indisputably post-Enlightenment phenomena and very much marked by that fact.

Consequently, it is not the case that the methods of literary and historical interpretation are suitable instruments in themselves for recovering transcendence and mystery. This is, in fact, a much-discussed issue. [6] More needs to be said here regarding what Allen envisions.

Second, it seems to me that the comments on canon and kerygma are particularly problematic when brought together. On the one hand, the comments on canon somewhat misstate the case. While they are for the most part historically accurate, they are slightly misleading. The *concept* of canon is as crucial as the content, and we certainly see the concept operative within the early church and evidenced in the New Testament writings themselves. The early church does see itself possessing and handing on authoritative traditions—both dominical and apostolic—underlying and reflected in the Gospels and Epistles. These traditions apparently include matters of doctrine, morality, and even church polity. [7]

On the other hand, the discussion of the kerygma comes on the heels of a discussion of the Restoration movement's concern with identifying essentials. Coupled with the impression that the early church had no functioning canon other than the Old Testament, this almost inescapably gives the impression that identifying the kerygma or theological center of biblical faith (Old and New Testaments) cuts the Gordian knot of Restoration preoccupations with such matters as church polity and the like by invalidating them as "non-kerygmatic" and therefore non-essential.

Identifying the kerygma as the "theological center of gravity" which gives direction and coherence to early Christian faith and practice does not dismiss traditional Restoration concerns with matters such as church polity and ecclesiastical organization. It does significantly recast these discussions, but it does not invalidate them.

Eduard Schweizer, for example, while admitting that the New Testament does not provide a law to imitate regarding church order,

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nonetheless argues that church order in the early church is not simply a matter of indifference as in the Lutheran tradition.[8] Rather, Schweizer states,

> the New Testament's pronouncements on Church order are to be read as a *gospel*—that is, Church order is to be regarded as a part of the proclamation in which the Church's witness is expressed, as it is in its preaching. [9]

Finally, a word needs to be said about the content of the kerygma itself. Allen gives references to von Rad and C. H. Dodd (p. 79 notes 38, 39). Dodd actually gives two versions of the early Christian preaching, one the pre-Pauline message of the early Jerusalem church and one the Pauline version.[10] With some modifications, Allen gives five of Dodd's six points in his summary of primitive Christian preaching (p. 73). Dodd's sixth point reads:

> Finally, the kerygma always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of "salvation," that is, of "the life of the Age to come," to those who enter the elect community. [11]

Dodd then quotes Acts 2:38 at the head of a list of verses stating the claim of the kerygma on the life of the believer: "Repent and be baptized, each of you, upon the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."[12]

It appears to me that this would be an excellent place to ground our traditional emphasis on believers' baptism in the kerygma rather than in a theology about the Bible (which distorts the meaning of baptism).[13] It is my understanding that more recent works of Stuhlmacher, Hengel, and Ben Meyer only further support the kerygmatic status of both baptism and the Lord's Supper.[14]

I emphasize this because here would be an opportunity for Allen to base his later statements on baptism (pp. 137-38, 142, 173). Further, it would reinforce traditional Restoration emphases on baptism and counter the growing tendency of some to retain a place for baptism, but only as a practice of our own "heritage," while theologically embracing a rather thin, generic Protestantism.

After chapter four's excellent discussion on idolatry, chapters five, six, and seven could be termed semi-practical or even pastoral.

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Although a simple summary cannot do justice to these chapters, they call us (a) to become a radically new community—alien citizens living in sharp contrast with the dominant surrounding ethos; (b) to allow God's Spirit to generate an alternative environment/ethos which evokes and nourishes Christian virtues; and (c) to be mindful of the need to be marked by Christlike compassion more than doctrinal correctness.

This is very good material. One could wish more were done here, however. For example, it would have been helpful had Allen given attention to questions of church polity and ecclesiastical structures reflecting and sustaining the ethos of the "cruciform life." Additionally, more would be helpful regarding the church's need to reject violence and power and the Restoration tradition's ambivalence on this issue.

Regarding these last chapters, I have four reservations: two that are essentially tactical and two that are perhaps more theological. First, I was surprised to read that the community of the cross (alien citizens, the cruciform church standing at odds with the dominant ethos) is designated as a "community of equals" (p. 138, also 161). To describe "God's new social order," with the term "equality" (earlier linked to the influence of the "Democratic revolution of the age," pp. 22, 23) seriously weakens—if not invalidates—the cross's call to radical self-abnegation and opens the community of the cross to exploitation by overwhelming cultural pressures and political ideologies. It risks rendering the community of the cross a "rights" community rather than one offering an alternative (eschatological) vision wherein each one counts others better than oneself—following the pattern of Him who counted equality with God not a thing to be grasped.

Second, while I have the greatest sympathy for the goal of trying to find a way out of the present situation, I have reservations about the use of small groups (p. 169). In the modern climate, small groups tend to reflect popular psychology and the therapeutic ethos more than that of the cross. They encourage equating the "closeness of the group" with Christian fellowship per se. And they may further weaken the already weak commitment to the broader community. (While this reservation is at least tactical, it becomes more substantive to the extent that Allen is uninterested in church polity and

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ecclesiastical organization.)

Third, the concluding chapter indicts the tendency to separate doctrine and ethics and to neglect the latter. Allen rightly calls us from a shallow orthodoxy to an orthodoxy that includes and emphasizes holy and compassionate living.

Unfortunately, the discussion of compassion tends to link—if not in fact ground—compassion in natural morality and, more precisely, in the complex area of moral psychology.

Further, the particular moral psychology is problematic. The role of imagination is rather narrowly linked to our ability to see or imagine ourselves in the other person (p. 178). There is a failure here to distinguish clearly between the role of imagination in making compassion effective—and its role in providing the motive for compassion. Compassion is presented not only as guided by imagination, but apparently rooted in the perception that the other person's "weakness and pain" is "potentially our own" (p. 177). Consequently, what emerges—and, I think, completely unintentionally—is a rather thinly disguised form of ethical egoism more reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes than the selflessness of the cross.

Fourth, I want to put a sharper focus on a problem already noted. Given the significance Allen places on the "theology of the cross," it is important to recall the origin of the phrase. Although it has become general Christian property, the designation *theologia crucis* originates with Martin Luther. Significantly, Luther's theology of the cross did not produce a "cruciform church" in mainline Lutheranism. Rather, the cruciform church more nearly appears among Anabaptist groups.

It could be asked whether Allen wants a Lutheran theology and an Anabaptist church. While that may be too neat, Allen's (Luther-like) inattention to ecclesiastical structures and church polity at least suggests that he is more concerned with the "cruciform life" than the "cruciform church." Unfortunately, the cruciform life requires the supporting ethos of the cruciform church.

In conclusion, Leonard Allen has gained a well-earned national reputation as an American church historian. He is to be commended for using his abilities in the interests of the church in *The Cruciform Church*. He has written a good book, an important book—one in

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which he has "gotten his hands dirty" in addressing practical matters. Allen has made a good start in calling us to reassess our fundamental commitments and has forced us to reflect and ask a number of crucial questions: In what sense are we a *theological* tradition? What is that tradition? And, provided that we are a theological tradition, what kind of church and life should our theological tradition evoke?

NOTES

1. A version of this review was delivered at the Christian Scholars Conference at Abilene Christian University, July 1990.

2. See Gary Collier's article in this issue of *Christian Studies*, note 4.

3. Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Cincinnati: Standard, undated edition; originally 1839) 6.

4. Campbell, 3.

5. Campbell, 3, 4.

6. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). Stuhlmacher documents the history of historical critical method and proposes a "hermeneutics of consent" that is "open to transcendence."

7. Further, it is simply not the case that the New Testament letters are all occasional documents written in the first instance only for specific audiences. Among Paul's undisputed letters, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and possibly Romans all are written for more than one congregation. Additionally, Colossians even envisions an exchange of letters with Laodicea. And Ephesians gives evidence of being written to more than one church if not as a cover letter to the Pauline collection.

8. Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959) 14 n 7.

9. Schweizer, 14.

10. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951). Dodd summarizes the Pauline kerygma on page 17 and the pre-Pauline kerygma of the Jerusalem church on pages 21-24.

11. Dodd, 23.

12. Dodd, 23.

13. Cf. Michael R. Weed, "Evangelism, Ethics, and Eschatological Existence," *Christian Studies* 10 (Fall 1989) 54f.

14. Cf. Ben Meyer, "The Expiation Motif in the Eucharistic Words: A Key to the History of Jesus?" *Gregorianum*, 69, 3.

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