

The *SBJT* Forum: Testimonies to a Theologian

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. D. A. Carson, Timothy George, Harold O. J. Brown, C. Ben Mitchell, Carl Trueman, Mark Dever and Hutz H. Hertzberg have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. The journal's goal for the Forum is to provide significant thinkers' views on topics of interest without requiring lengthy articles from these heavily-committed individuals. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: We know that during the last quarter-century you developed a close friendship with Carl F. H. Henry and his wife Helga. Would you share any personal reminiscences?

D. A. Carson: Although my wife and I are more than a generation younger than Carl and Helga Henry, that would never have deterred them from friendship. The reason was threefold: first, they made common cause with anyone who was passionate about the gospel, and age had nothing to do with it; second, as they became more infirm, they learned, however reluctantly, to accept help from those willing to give it, precisely because they were never proud; and third, and most important, Carl and Helga were never inclined to dwell only in the past. They were always looking ahead to the future—and that meant they welcomed younger friends.

A few paragraphs cannot do justice to the shape of the friendship we forged, especially during the last twenty years—and in any case, some matters should remain private. Nevertheless, it is easy to recall things that *should* be shared. Occasional meals at our home would find both Carl and Helga quizzing our kids,

chatting them up with real interest and without a trace of condescension. My daughter's first exposure to Carl came when he was preaching one Sunday evening at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge. Our daughter, then five years old and beginning to read and write, chose that evening to follow, for the first time, what she had observed in her parents: she decided to take notes of the sermon. The great Carl Henry delivered his soul on Ecclesiastes 12: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'"—followed by colorful biblical description of physical decay: the grinders cease because they are few (i.e., one's teeth fall out), the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades (we become deaf), the daylight fades as our eyes grow dim, and we are so arthritic that we drag ourselves around like crippled grasshoppers, clumsy and inept. The silver cord is finally severed (our spinal column falls apart). The dust returns to the ground it came from. So remember your Creator in the days of your youth. Our daughter wrote, "Grass-

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hoppers are good. Silver cords break. The ground is dusty." Carl, Carl, you may not have got through to our five-year-old on that Sunday evening, but your whole life preached Ecclesiastes 12.

Carl and Helga traveled all over the world, preaching and lecturing. But although they could tell a prodigious number of interesting stories, some of them evocative or even funny, their overriding concern was the advance of the gospel. As I started traveling a bit more myself, Carl wanted more than updates of esoteric places: he wanted to know how the gospel of Jesus Christ was faring in each place. In his declining years, even when Carl was largely confined to a wheel chair or a bed and his mind was somewhat dulled by pain-killers, our visits up to Watertown could find us talking about our respective families, places we had visited, books we had read, the ups and downs of theological education—but invariably, invariably, those discussions ended up looking forward, not backward. Invariably, invariably, that forward-look stance had a worldwide flavor. Some senior Christians only look backward; not Carl, not Helga, not ever. Some senior Christians become cranky whiners; not Carl, not Helga. Increased infirmity sometimes made them homesick for heaven, but not once did we find ingratitude or bitterness in them. And in private moments, as my wife and I took our leave, Carl and Helga would sing, in now wavering voices, one of their Christian choruses, a life-long habit springing from more than sixty years of Christian service and faithful marriage.

I suppose it would be understandable if a man who had written forty influential books had become arrogant, if a man who had walked with Christian and

world leaders had become intoxicated by his own significance, if a man who had confronted deep disappointment and excruciating bereavement in his family had become bitter. It would, I say, have been understandable. But the grace of God was strong in this man. He remained a theological thinker to the very end, but without a trace of pretension. On one memorable occasion about ten years ago, when one of our students picked Carl up from O'Hare and drove him onto our campus so that he could teach a modular course, the student, more than a little in awe of the great man, pointed to the large extension to the Roling Library, and asked, "What does it feel like to have your name on a great building?" Carl replied, "It feels like I should be dead!"

One of my favorite memories springs from something we organized at Trinity more than a decade and a half ago. We invited both Carl Henry and Kenneth Kantzer, then in their seventies, to lecture on the previous half-century of evangelicalism in America and beyond. These lectures, delivered to the entire student body, were videotaped. The next day, I was charged with interviewing the two men. I did not tell them in advance what questions I would ask. Inevitably I probed their thinking about many individuals (e.g., Billy Graham) and movements (even the SBC!). Invariably they replied with careful understanding, including some astute observations. Then, toward the end of the session, I asked a question along the following lines: "Many old men begin to tear down what they built. They become jealous of younger leaders coming along, or they focus on peripheral matters and lose their passion for the gospel. They frequently become arrogant and defensive. But both of you are gospel-

centered, and given to encouraging a new generation. Despite your vast influence in many quarters, you do not come across as arrogant. How have you managed that? And do not simply say, 'By the grace of God.' That is true, of course—but I want to know how this grace has worked out in your lives." Both of them sputtered for a bit, and then Carl blurted out, "How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?" It was the best moment on the videotape.

Carl understood, as well as any of us, that the grace that saves us is the grace that sustains us and enables us to bear fruit. From this perspective, we are all, at best, unprofitable servants—even Carl F. H. Henry. Still, that same grace is heard when the trumpets sound, and a Carl Henry enters eternity, and hears the voice of the Master saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord." We rejoice with you, Carl, as with one who has fought the good fight of the faith; we rejoice with you, and we miss you more than we can say.

If I had to list a few items for which Carl should be remembered—a few items, I say, from what could be a very long list—they might include the following:

(1) In some ways Carl reminds us that God gifts certain people in peculiar ways in order to respond to specific challenges. Carl was not simply a theologian. In some ways, he was a sophisticated theological journalist, able to understand what was going on around him, read it theologically, and explain it to fellow Christians. In addition to his interest in theology, indeed because of his interest in theology, he was also an entrepreneur: hence his long commitment to *Christianity Today*, his

vision for the Berlin Congress on World Evangelism, and much more. He thought strategically, and sought to bring about the goals he clearly envisaged.

(2) Carl developed what I call a prophetic voice from the center. That is an extraordinarily difficult achievement, but one of the most important. While serving as editor of *Christianity Today*, he strove to make the "thought magazine" (as he called it) as broad as confessional evangelicalism, and broader still in its reporting, *while preserving a stance that focused on the central things, the non-negotiables, the common truths and realities*: he was prophetic from the center. This is a far cry from many would-be "prophetic" voices today that almost always focus on something at the periphery as if it were at the center. Carl was too faithful a Bible reader for that.

(3) Because of this prophetic stance from the center, he could call the church to reformation along very different lines, depending on what he saw going on, what weaknesses seemed to be prevailing at that point. Yes, he could defend propositional revelation (though his stance on this matter is today more often parodied than understood and appreciated), but he could also call the church back to massive social engagement, as in his enormously influential 1947 volume, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. He never sang only one tune.

(4) All his life, he strove to practice what he preached. The stories that are told in this arena are legion.

(5) He was a great encourager of others, not least younger men and women. His correspondence was voluminous, much of it cast in the guise of encouragement. Both he and Helga penned thousands, probably tens of thousands, of personal notes

and letters to encourage other Christians along their way.

(6) Although he learned to think strategically, and therefore valued well-placed leaders who could use their influence for good, he was never snookered by the high and the mighty—proved, no doubt, by the way he interacted constantly with the most humble and needy.

(7) He was gospel-centered and forward-looking. He was interested in preparing people for tomorrow and the next day, not merely in enabling them to understand yesterday and the day before.

And in my mind's eye, I can still conjure him up. I can still hear him exhorting us: Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them."