



Andrew Kim

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

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The year 2016, which marks the 75th anniversary of the American Scientific Affiliation, also marks the 100th anniversary of the birth of Bernard L. Ramm (1916–1992), one of the affiliation's most important figures, and one whose influence among evangelicals in the area of religion and science has been matched by few others. Much of the historical attention given to Ramm has focused on his scientific background and how it influenced his biblical hermeneutic and treatment of scientific topics. However, through use of hitherto unstudied sources, this article will show how his scientific background also conditioned his overarching theological method. By building on ideas rooted in orthodoxy and history, openly accepting new data and evidence into his system, and adjusting his ideas to compensate for changes and developments, Ramm exhibited a scientific methodology that undergirded the development, change, and growth of his theology throughout his career.

As news of the gravitational wave readings at the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) was publicly announced on February 11, 2016, excitement rippled through the scientific community. The LIGO data supplied evidence for theories of space-time and gravitational waves postulated by Albert Einstein in 1916 and confirmed “Einstein’s theory of gravity, the general theory of relativity, with unprecedented rigor and provide[d] proof positive that black holes exist.”¹

The discovery was a culmination of years of research and technology development and provided the impetus for even more research. Ironically, in 1936, Einstein had doubts about his theories and even submitted a paper retracting his gravitational wave theory. After Einstein had proposed his “correction,” though, an editor discovered an error in the “revised” calculations and confirmed Einstein’s original ideas. Fortunately, the openness inherent in the scientific endeavor rescued Einstein’s theory and allowed for its continued development, which,

in turn, made the recent discovery possible.² In other words, Einstein’s scientific approach not only retained original ideas but also left room for reconsideration, revision, and review, which allowed for further contribution and development.

Born in the same year that Einstein gave birth to his gravitational wave theory was a quiet and unassuming American Baptist theologian named Bernard Ramm (1916–1992). He lived during the heart of the twentieth century, when Christian fundamentalism was at its nadir in engaging with the culture and with science, and his work helped Christians adjust to changes in society as reflected in theology, especially regarding science. As he wrestled with difficult questions, he realized the need to leave room for development and reconsideration, and was willing to adjust his theological stance in the light of new views and information.

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Article

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

Ramm's significance stemmed from the scientific approach he took in his theological work.³ As a young man who embraced a conservative or even fundamentalist theology, he realized that a dogmatic and inflexible approach inevitably led to conflict with scientific evidence and societal progress.⁴ Over time, he realized that a new theological method was necessary to adequately address the issues. Ramm's method of combining orthodox principles with an evangelical openness created space for him and other Christians to incorporate new evidence and to develop new ideas without abandoning traditional Christian beliefs. This "scientific" methodology allowed him to explore new frontiers, to integrate innovative new ideas, and to reject those ideas that failed to meet rigorous standards.⁵

The purpose of this article will be to demonstrate the scientific methodology of Ramm's theology and to show how his methods created room for other evangelical Christians to think in new ways, particularly in the realm of science, during the twentieth century. To do this, I will make use of a recently discovered, unfinished manuscript by Ramm written shortly before his death, as well as interviews with his children, to illuminate how he utilized a scientific approach to develop his theology. I will also outline his background in science and how it affected his methods, his turn toward evangelicalism as an alternative to liberalism and fundamentalist obscurantism, and a "third way" forward created by the scientific methodology of his subsequent work.

Ramm's Foundations in Science

Ramm was born on August 1, 1916, in Butte, Montana, growing up in an area far from the theological controversies engulfing the centers of theology in Germany and America. His father, a miner, wanted his children to succeed in the business world and moved his family to Seattle near the University of Washington so that his children would be more inclined to attend college.⁶

In high school, Ramm proved to be an excellent student. He was blessed with a photographic memory and had a natural affinity for science.⁷ Time spent with neighborhood friends, some of them professors' children, became a powerful influence, with young Bernard frequently visiting the homes of two friends.⁸ The father of one friend, Alex, was a Russian

immigrant and an engineer, who influenced the two young friends through exciting and fascinating conversations regarding physics and chemistry as well as experiments in electricity and mechanics performed in the garage.⁹ This relationship with Alex's family was highly formative. As he later recalled, "It was due to my association with Alex that I decided to make a career in science."¹⁰

As he approached graduation from high school, he planned on studying chemistry or engineering. Looking back on this time in his life, he described himself as

a typical high school graduate with a mind stocked with what practically all high school graduates have when they leave high school—a profound respect for the sciences, a hope for a newer and better civilization, a toleration and mild respect for religion, a delight in sports and entertainment, and a desire "to make good" in the world.¹¹

What Ramm did not expect, however, was an even more powerful influence that would enter his life when his older brother, John, ushered him toward a more personal experience of Christianity. He had been casually attending church at the suggestion of his mother, when John, a recent convert to Christianity, shared his faith with his younger brother and invited Bernard to attend a summer Bible camp.¹² Referring to himself in the third person, he dramatically described his conversion experience at the camp saying,

Then the gospel came to him. In one three-minute period his entire life perspective and basic personality were changed. He experienced the inflowing grace and transforming power of the grace of God. In a few moments he received a new philosophy, a new theology, a new heart, and a new life.¹³

Ramm entered the University of Washington in 1934 as an engineering major, but a career in engineering no longer captured his imagination. He contemplated a change in major to religion, but his father threatened to not fund his education should he do so.¹⁴ Thus, he completed a degree in engineering as he originally intended, but during breaks from his engineering studies, he continued to study philosophy and theology on his own.¹⁵

The theology books that Ramm obtained, however, he remembered as a mishmash of varying quality, and he soon realized how inadequate were the

foundations that he had absorbed from them. When his introductory psychology professor assigned an evaluation of psychology from an evolutionary perspective, he strongly vilified the evolutionary position using information that he had garnered from his informal theology readings. The professor returned his paper with markings all over it, highlighting the numerous weaknesses in his arguments. Ramm recalled,

My paper eventually was returned with a note in red ink saying that my paper looked as if had been garnered from anti-evolutionary pamphlets. In my ignorance I said to myself "How did he know?" That was exactly what I had done. It occurred to me once and for all, [the weakness of] cheap scholarship in the defense of faith.¹⁶

It was at that point that Ramm began to understand the need for a more learned understanding of the faith. He did not fully abandon his fundamentalist beliefs at that point, but the experience had left a significant impression upon his intellectual self-awareness. A faith built on faulty foundations would no longer suffice for him. From that point, he committed himself to a course of rigorous study that would deepen not only his own theological comprehension but eventually help others in their Christian journeys as well.

Upon graduation in 1938, Ramm decided to forego a career in engineering and entered the BD program at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, a conservative school newly founded by the Northern Baptist Convention.¹⁷ He completed his degree in 1941 while also doing graduate studies at the nearby University of Pennsylvania. During this time, he held an interim pastorate in New York City but soon realized that his gifting was in the arena of academic study and writing.¹⁸

In pursuit of this course, Ramm moved to the West Coast in order to begin graduate studies in philosophy at the University of Southern California (USC).¹⁹ During this time, though, he maintained his interest in science, as his MA (1947) and PhD (1950) were both in the philosophy of science.²⁰ He was also appointed Professor of Biblical Languages at Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary in 1943, and in 1944 moved to the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) to become head of the Department of Philosophy and Apologetics.

It was during his PhD studies and while teaching at BIOLA that he finally came to a stark realization regarding his scientific, philosophical, and religious presuppositions. Ramm had been given the task of taking over an apologetics course at BIOLA, but was soon roiled by an internal conflict. He realized that the text he had been using for his apologetics class, authored by fundamentalist Harry Rimmer, was filled with logical and scientific inadequacies that he could no longer overlook.²¹ Rather than instructing students through use of the text, he found himself working harder to defend positions in Rimmer's book that were no longer intellectually tenable. After attempting to communicate with Rimmer about this and receiving no reply, he concluded,

The deeper I got into the philosophy of science the more I recognized the inadequacies of Rimmer's work ... and went on to developing my own ideas. This was the origin of my book, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*.²²

Through this experience, Ramm comprehended that he needed to abandon the fundamentalist position that he had held for nearly two decades and establish positions that were philosophically substantiated. From his final unpublished manuscript, he reflected on this period of his life:

I became lost in an internal debate going on in which one part of me asked the questions and another part sought for answers. Could I catapult my faith into problem-free territory? An area in which no distressing questions were allowed? ... Was the only defense of the faith pure fideism (by faith alone)? ... I pledged myself to follow the truth in every situation and flee from fideism (a faith which denies the right of questions) ... How can a Christian do otherwise in a modern world that is becoming more sophisticated every day?²³

He had arrived at a place where he could no longer accept a theology that failed to face fair questions, square with logic and philosophy, or fit the data that had been gathered by scientists.

Leaving behind the fundamentalism that limited him, Ramm now sought a realm in which he could explore and experiment with fresh ideas.²⁴ He wrote,

Because evangelical theology represents a minority report in the present theological scene, evangelicals should not be defensive and hostile. The Christian scholar is not only freed from the judgment of God, freed from the tyrannical fear of sin, but also freed

Article

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

in his mind in the world of academia where he can be God's free scholar.²⁵

He realized the need to turn toward a novel approach that would keep his ideas grounded in traditional belief, yet simultaneously open his ideas to scrutiny and testing against the difficult questions of the culture in order to examine their validity. Failure to do so could only lead to intellectual isolation and degradation.

His new approach reflected an openness intrinsic to the scientific endeavor, which was rooted in his own scientific background. Reflecting on his process of expanding knowledge, Ramm stated,

Growth in a tradition is exactly this process. To the question, "How could you maintain your evangelical identity through the years?" my answer would be "because I didn't bury myself in it" but grew in it, carefully keeping trace of the pedigree of what was old and what was new.²⁶

By looking to traditional beliefs as a foundation upon which to build, his theological construction was methodical. He concluded that the fundamentalist position alone was not enough, and this forced him into new intellectual frontiers.

Ramm thus realized the need to abandon his former stance in favor of openness to new ideas that would allow him and other Christians to grow in theology and in faith. He left behind a theology that was self-limiting and embraced a method that would allow him to experiment with new ideas. He would therefore need to find an arena that would allow him to do this. It was at this juncture in his life that he began the deliberate move toward a scientifically derived theology supported by fellow evangelicals.

Ramm and Evangelicalism

In the latter half of the 1940s, a new movement began to emerge in America as various fundamentalists acknowledged that some of their number had become overly aggressive, militant, and separatist in relation to other Christians and toward the culture.²⁷ During the early part of the twentieth century, conservative Christians had begun to withdraw from universities, some due to the secularizing effect they perceived and some due to eschatological expectations of Christ's imminent return.²⁸ Because of this, many fundamentalists had disengaged from the culture and active evangelism.

Members of the new movement, by contrast, sought to engage society rather than separate from it.²⁹ Supporters of this neo-evangelical movement called themselves simply "evangelicals" and came from all denominations, as evidenced by the diversity of members involved in the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) in 1942, which drew from across the American Protestant spectrum.³⁰ These evangelicals sought to express their faith through adherence to orthodox belief, intimate re-engagement with the culture, and active evangelism.³¹ The rapid growth of the NAE in the mid-1900s reflected the popularity of the evangelical movement across longstanding, traditional denominational lines.

Despite the diverse draw of the evangelical movement and the focus on active evangelism, the two largest Baptist groups, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and the American Baptist Churches (ABC-USA), the latter of which Ramm was a member, never joined the NAE. Reasons for the ABC-USA not joining the NAE are not completely clear, but individual Baptists were still free to interact with evangelicals, and the young theologian took advantage of the opportunity in the early 1950s.³² The evangelical movement offered believers of different backgrounds the chance to engage with other conservative Christians and provided the space to explore new ideas without fear of being labeled as "liberal" by the Christian community.

This interaction invigorated Ramm, and, though remaining faithfully tied to the ABC-USA, he began to identify himself as an evangelical. He wrote:

The evangelical believes in growth within a tradition ... [It is a mistake if] they think that their only alternatives are to stay in the theological rut of their early fundamentalism and stagnate or jump to some recent non-evangelical theology and keep in the center of the modern theological action ... Evangelicals believe that they have a stable theology stemming from a stable tradition, but it is not the essence of evangelical theology not to grow within the bounds of its theological tradition.³³

Thus, he became a voice that called other Christians to actively think, write, believe, and grow under conditions that would promote progress and test ideas in a fair-minded manner.

Ramm accused those opposed to such openness of "obscurantism," a willful ignorance and deliberate

rejection of inquiry into the truth and of refusal to accept responsible criticism of ideas. He wrote,

With the maturing of science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, evangelicalism was faced with a battery of questions. Most disturbing were the developments in geology and biology.... The standard position of fundamentalism ... was to deny the truthfulness of these theories in the name of inspired Scripture.³⁴

By seeking to “protect” the Bible and antiquated theology, fundamentalists became “obscurantists.”

In contrast, he again demonstrated the scientific quality of his work in that he stretched his theology to encompass new knowledge to see whether biblical and theological claims to truth were valid. He was no longer willing to hide behind dogmatic statements or blind himself to evidence of any kind that was available to Christians. For Ramm it was, in fact, the Christian’s responsibility to continually work without rejecting basic tenets of belief, to gather more evidence, and to reconsider positions as needed. This was what the evangelical position offered him the freedom to do, and this formed the basis of his approach for the rest of his career, especially when it came to science. Because of his attitude, evangelicals were better equipped to keep pace with the rapid scientific changes that began to occur in America in the 1950s and beyond.

Ramm’s Scientific Approach to Religion and Science

In taking a scientific approach to his theology, he was inevitably drawn toward the issues surrounding the relationship between religion and science. He was keenly aware of the challenges that modern scientific discoveries in support of evolution placed before believers, and the ethical dilemmas brought about by fields such as genetics and computer technology. Without hesitation, Ramm squarely faced the issues, confident that a robust theology could not only meet the challenges, but also benefit from them and grow stronger. Believing that religious liberalism ventured too far in one direction by abandoning biblical foundations and that “hyperorthodoxy” (his term for fundamentalism) went too far in the other direction by enclosing itself in biblical literalism, “we defend a position which asserts that a positive relationship must exist between science and Christianity.”³⁵ In other words, evangelicals could side neither with

the hyperorthodox, who rejected science, nor with the religious liberals, who rejected core tenets of the Bible. For Ramm, “true evangelicalism, as distinct from fundamentalism, must represent a third alternative” of intellectual engagement with science.³⁶

The main thrust of his 1954 text, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, was to do exactly this: without putting aside the Bible or dismissing evolution, consider how religion and science might work as companions. The legacy of the text was to introduce Christians, particularly those interested in science, to new ways of thinking about the Bible and how the Bible and science might inform one another. In the introduction to *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*, Ramm wrote,

There has been and is a noble tradition in Bible and science, and this is the tradition of the great and learned evangelical Christians who have been patient, genuine, and kind and who have taken great care to learn the facts of science and Scripture ... It is our wish to call evangelicalism back to the noble tradition.³⁷

After outlining a philosophical framework for the harmony between science and scripture, he systematically laid out the causes of the apparent conflict, reasons for rejecting such conflicts, and scientific evidence to support such proposed harmony. His use of sound logic and the most up-to-date evidence (as of 1954) helped give many Christians a “third alternative” and a way forward.

What made his work significant, though, was that his efforts did not stop with this text. Instead, he was continually willing to consider other views and modify his own. There was no “one third way” for Ramm—it was a willingness to explore and dynamically respond to the developments that science continued to bring. Theologian Alan Day described this process by saying, “Ramm’s scientifically trained mind has enabled him to view science and scientists without the naïve suspicion characteristic of some of his contemporaries”; his understanding of science freed him of commitments that might imprison his thinking.³⁸

In his final manuscript, he reflected upon his career, writing,

This experience [of renouncing confining commitments] set my policy for handling all problems connected with the evangelical faith. It cut off at

Article

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

this time any refuge in an artificial land free from icy blasts: i.e., from anti-intellectualism and obscurantism.³⁹

In other words, he was committed to exploration and inquiry in search of a better and richer theology that engaged directly with the relationship between science and religion.

For example, Ramm even looked beyond Baptist or Protestant practices to learn from approaches to science and religion taken by Roman Catholics. In his 1954 article "The Catholic Approach to Bible and Science," he analyzed the history of the Roman Catholic Church in response to previous encounters with science and how it reacted to the issue of evolution. He noted the changes in various Catholic encyclicals that gave Catholics the freedom to consider and study evolution without necessarily being committed to it as a doctrine. Almost with a tinge of envy, Ramm said,

It is possible (if the case of the Roman Catholic Church be an analogue) to permit many concessions to geology and evolutionary biology, and still not disrupt a rather rigid dogmatic theology. The word *evolution* is still a very controversial word among evangelicals, but has lost almost all its emotive force as far as Catholics are concerned ... In general Catholic scholars are given far more liberty of interpretation in matters of Biblical criticism and science than is accorded scholars in evangelical and fundamental circles in Protestantism.⁴⁰

This showed him that there were other people engaged in thinking about the subject of science and religion in ways that were beyond partisanship or emotion, and that such freedom was available to him and other Christians.

A significant event in Ramm's career provides additional evidence of the fact that he was not locked into one way of thinking. In 1957, he seized the opportunity to spend his sabbatical year studying theology with Karl Barth in Basel, Switzerland.⁴¹ During this year of study, he found that the interpretations of Barth's theology that he had been taught as a young seminary student were flawed. Instead, upon meeting Barth in person, he realized that he had found "a genius with imagination, who was able to see relationships obscure to others."⁴² Although he had some reservations about certain aspects of Barth's theological system, he believed that Barth could help evangelicals in multiple ways.⁴³

Many fundamentalists with whom Ramm had kept company for many years criticized him for his embracing of neo-orthodoxy, but he would not be deterred. He spent his year in Basel reading Barth's theology and gathering with other English speakers for weekly group discussions in Barth's home. He was also able to engage Barth in personal conversations throughout the week. He concluded, "With genius ability Barth has restated the old faith, the historic Christian theology, in a way that is believable for modern man."⁴⁴

Ramm was able to converse with Barth about many topics, including science and religion. He recalled from his time in Switzerland, "Barth suggested that 'if we truly believed that we had the truth of God in Holy Scripture we should be fearless in opening any door or any window in the pursuit of our theological craft.'"⁴⁵

In his 1986 reflection upon his time in Basel, he said that Barth personally encouraged him to evaluate his theology from different angles, including his reflections on science. Ramm wrote:

I saw in rapid succession on the parade ground in my mind the futility and intellectual bankruptcy of my former strategy and the wonderful freeing strategy of Barth's theological method. I could be just as free a person in theology as I would be if I were an experimental scientist. With the full persuasion of the truth of God in Holy Scripture I could fearlessly read, study, and listen to all options and opinions in theology.⁴⁶

These developments gave him the ability to venture into new directions and come to new conclusions that would not have been available to him had he retained his original approach. Although he did not know it at the time, his willingness to take academic risks enabled him to experience a cross-fertilization of new ideas that enriched his own thought. Offering an analysis of this boldness, theologian Clark Pinnock wrote of his colleague,

A major example of his openness to change occurred with the publication of *After Fundamentalism* in 1983, when for the first time Ramm publicly declared Barth to be the paradigm for evangelicals to follow in their efforts to come to grips with the challenge of the Enlightenment ... Considering who Ramm is and what faith community he is part of, this step constituted a major symbolic move and illustrates his fearlessness and flexibility.⁴⁷

Taking Pinnock's analysis a bit further, it was not just fearlessness or flexibility on Ramm's part, but also a commitment to explore new ways of thinking that potentially unlocked new ideas and solutions.

After returning from his year of study in Basel, he began to rapidly publish a series of articles on science and theology, both in the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation (JASA)* and in *Eternity* magazine. Ramm, beginning in the late 1940s, had already initiated what physics professor Joseph Spradley called a "long and fruitful relationship with the American Scientific Affiliation," which would continue throughout his career.⁴⁸ In *JASA*, Ramm wrote on topics such as theological reactions to the theory of evolution (1963), the relationship between science and inerrancy (1969), humanity's interaction with technology (1971), death (1973), the ethics of biogenetic engineering (1974), and a scientific view of the issues of sin and evil (1975).⁴⁹ In *Eternity*, he wrote about science and theology (1965), the epistemological questions of science as knowledge (1966), the ethical dilemmas of prolonging life (1976), and the potential abuses of amniocentesis (1976).⁵⁰ It is clear that the interaction between science and religion was never a forgotten topic during his time in academia and that his mind continued to seek new ways of understanding contemporary cultural phenomena.

Ramm was no blind optimist, though; he knew that knotty theological topics would not be answered without facing difficulties. Just as a scientist toils at the bench and encounters drawbacks as well as his or her own limitations, Ramm was keenly aware that some problems would remain in any theological system that he favored. He wrote,

A person may unload his evangelical faith for either some philosophy or theology [but] there is no philosophy or theology without its problems ... One has to decide which problems he chooses to live with.⁵¹

As he taught his theology and apologetics students over the years, he always reminded them of this fact. "I have admonished students that if they seem overburdened with problems in their theology," he wrote near the end of his life, "there is no recourse to a system of thought without its problems. The cloudless beatific vision of truth is not for this world ... To this day I have on hold some of my problems with the Christian faith."⁵²

Despite these difficulties, Ramm, in good scientific fashion, continued to move forward throughout his career in his quest to find solutions with the hope that even if he were unable to formulate answers, future colleagues would be able to. Just as the scientific enterprise continues to build its base of knowledge, he believed that theology could do the same. He mused,

In theological studies one should not prematurely judge that a disturbing question or problem has no solution. Granted, there is a fine line between dodging an issue and patiently waiting for a solution. Aware of this, nevertheless I have maintained that a problem that at the present seems impossible to resolve may yet be resolved in the future. And in many instances this has been my own experience.⁵³

In other words, while he saw himself as a theologian engaged in the task of developing theoretical models that sufficiently answered problems, he also saw himself as part of a larger community that was similarly laboring; he believed that his work would combine with that of others and eventually lead to answers.

In his research, Ramm continued to explore other fields in the hope that additional questions, along with data from other academic arenas, would help to inform his own. He stated,

Contemporary philosophy, contemporary theology, and contemporary science may be very unfriendly to evangelical theology. They seem to be opening all sorts of doors and windows to let in soul-chilling drafts of air. But ... the Word of God in our hearts should drive out fear—fear of an unexpected discovery in science or archeology or psychology or sociology. Not that in each instance evangelicals should rise up and refute the distressing charge. Christians are in this for the long haul, and vexing problems of today may well be resolved by tomorrow.⁵⁴

This approach to his work again reflected his scientific view of the theologian's task, in that the theological community, working together just as the scientific community does, would be able to engage, research, and ultimately provide solutions for difficult religious questions.

Thus, the actions taken and methods employed amply demonstrated that Ramm had a clear and

Article

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

deep respect for those who came before him, for those who thought differently from him, and for those whose work helped to expand the field of theology, as well as for the scholarly conversation and development generated by engagement with all three groups. This, in its essence, is the scientific method: interacting with prior data, collaborating with others in the field, integrating and synthesizing useful information from other fields, and working gradually and respectfully toward answers to both new and lingering questions. Ramm's great contribution was to apply this method to theology in ways that not only aided his own work but also helped support the work and faith of many Christians.

Conclusion

In an article written in honor of Ramm's retirement and published in *JASA*, Spradley wrote of the changes he observed in Ramm's approach to Christianity and science. He not only praised him for taking on challenges for evangelical scientists, but also noted his continued active support of scientists as a whole. Summarizing his career, Spradley declared:

The relationship between theologian Bernard Ramm and the ASA for more than forty years has helped to shape much of evangelical thinking about Biblical interpretation related to science ... Perhaps more than any other evangelical theologian in the United States, he has maintained an interest in science and has influenced evangelical scientists by his Christian thinking about science and scripture ... It was evident he was always testing and developing his ideas. This development is reflected in his changing views of science and religion ... [which] over the years have matched the growing needs of evangelicals involved in science.⁵⁵

This physicist took note of Ramm's scientific and methodical approach to the topic of science and religion, and praised him for working to build a broader theological foundation that could help evangelicals embrace science.

Spradley's analysis, however, requires further extension, for Ramm not only applied scientific principles to his biblical hermeneutic but also to his overarching theological method. He did not shy away from theological difficulties by hiding behind obscurantism, but rather adjusted his theology in a way that allowed both himself and other evangelicals the

opportunity to explore and embrace new possibilities for growth and new avenues of thought. Within the reflections on his life's work in his final manuscript, it is clear that Ramm evidenced a distinct scientific approach to his theology throughout his career. Because of this, there is much to appreciate and to learn from the systematic methodology of his work.

It is fitting that as the American Scientific Affiliation celebrates the 75th year of its existence, it also celebrates the 100th year of Ramm's birth. By the time he retired from academia in the 1980s, his career had spanned almost forty-five years, and he had written more than twenty-seven books and penned hundreds of articles. In his interactions with the ASA, he had presented at numerous annual meetings, and served as a contributing editor with *JASA* for almost twenty years.⁵⁶ His colleagues lauded him for his work in helping Christians in practical ways through his theology and through his work on religion and science, all while maintaining a humble and irenic spirit. His work with the ASA was appreciated such that his ASA colleagues honored him with a separate Festschrift detailing his contributions and help to the many Christians who found direction through his work.⁵⁷

From his initial interests in science as a youth, Ramm formed the basis of a powerful and effective methodology that united theology with a scientific approach. This method helped him to study and explore the many difficult ethical and theological issues facing Christians in the twentieth century. Unlike some conservatives, he did not resist the changes brought about by modernism, but instead embraced the opportunity and sought to develop paradigms that could provide new answers. His scientific tactics allowed him to cultivate and test theological ideas that accorded with reality. He confronted a modern scientific world with modern scientific methods, and, in so doing, helped evangelical Christians find their way through the challenges of modernity and avoid the pitfalls of obscurantism. In a twenty-first-century world in which religion and science continue in a contentious relationship even in evangelical circles, Ramm's ability to maintain his theological center while engaging science is a model still worth emulating. 

Notes

- ¹Adrian Cho, "Gravitational waves, Einstein's Ripples in Spacetime, Spotted for First Time," *Science*, last modified February 11, 2016, http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2016/02/gravitational-waves-einstein-s-ripples-spacetime-spotted-first-time?utm_campaign=email-news-weekly&et rid=17153613&et cid=273077.
- ²*Ibid.*
- ³In texts outlining key theologians of the twentieth century, Ramm is often cited along with his importance to the evangelical movement. For two examples, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Bernard Ramm," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 290–306; and Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 297–309. Vanhoozer refers to Ramm as a "John the Baptist [who] pointed to Christ and prepared a way for evangelical theology to go forward" (p. 306), while Olson, a former student of Ramm's at Bethel Seminary, says Ramm "provided the foundation for a generation of younger evangelical thinkers who would build on the freedom to think critically and engage in positive dialog with modern culture." Both cite Ramm's work on scientific topics, but this paper will examine the scientific quality of Ramm's theological methods.
- ⁴Bernard Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind" (unpublished and undated manuscript), PDF file. Used by permission of the Ramm family. This unfinished manuscript was written during the two years prior to Ramm's death in 1992 and includes recollections about and reflections upon various incidents during his career and life. Because it is unedited, quotes from the manuscript have been edited for spelling and punctuation.
- ⁵The term "scientific" is placed in quotes this one time in order to clarify what is meant by the term in regard to Ramm's work. Although his theology cannot be tested empirically or repetitively in a laboratory, the scientific quality of formulating ideas, testing them, incorporating new data, and revising theories based on new data is what will be applied to Ramm's theology in this article.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁷Elizabeth (Ramm) Attig, in interview with author, January–February 2015.
- ⁸Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind," 6.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 7, 8.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹¹The Ramm family provided the author with a copy of a single typewritten page recounting Ramm's own conversion testimony. There is no date as to when Ramm created this document. Ramm included a portion of this conversion account in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences: A Textbook of the Evidences of the Truthfulness of the Christian Faith for Conservative Protestants* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1954), 220. Because it is untitled, I will refer to this document as "Conversion Testimony" in future footnotes.
- ¹²Stephen Ramm, in interview with author, June 2015.
- ¹³Ramm, "Conversion Testimony" (no publisher, no date). Used by permission of the Ramm family. Also in Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences*, 220–21.
- ¹⁴Stephen Ramm, in interview with author, June 2015. Ramm was also a gifted athlete and could have funded his own education through a college athletic scholarship, until it was discovered in his senior year of high school

that he suffered from an enlarged heart and could no longer safely engage in strenuous physical activity or sports.

- ¹⁵Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind," 10.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁷The Northern Baptist Convention changed its name to the American Baptist Convention in 1950, and then again to the American Baptist Churches in the USA (ABC-USA) in 1972. For the purposes of this article, ABC or ABC-USA will be used. In the first half of the twentieth century, the ABC acknowledged the conservative members in the denomination through the establishment of three seminaries, one of which was Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, where Ramm went to seminary. For a description of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, in comparison to other ABC seminaries, see Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978), 433. Torbet describes the conservative and fundamentalist reaction to what was perceived as a liberal trend in the denomination, and the creation of more conservative institutions for orthodox teaching and education of ABC members.
- ¹⁸Note that Ramm published twenty-seven books and over two hundred articles during his career. While he also held interim pastorates later in Seattle, Washington, and in Glendale, California, eventually Ramm dedicated himself fully to his academic career.
- ¹⁹Ramm was able to study during this period since he was exempt from military duty, due to his heart condition. Stephen Ramm, in interview with author, June 2015.
- ²⁰Ramm's combination of religion, philosophy, and science are seen in his master's thesis, "The Idealism of Jeans and Eddington in Modern Physical Theory" (1947), and PhD dissertation, "An Investigation of Some Recent Efforts to Justify Metaphysical Statements Derived from Science with Special Reference to Physics" (1950), both at the University of Southern California.
- ²¹A detailed description of Rimmer's career as a fundamentalist who worked to dismiss the claims of evolution can be found in Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists* (New York: Random House, 1992), 60–71. It is not clear which book Ramm used, but Numbers lists several anti-evolutionary texts written by Rimmer (Note 22, 368) that might have been used.
- ²²Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind," 23. An additional biographical account of Rimmer's life and work can be found in the introduction to Harry Rimmer, *The Antievolution Pamphlets of Harry Rimmer*, ed. Edward B. Davis (New York: Garland Publishers, 1995), ix–xxviii. Davis's account of Ramm's letter to Rimmer can be found on p. xxi. The immense positive influence of Ramm's book on the evangelical community should be noted and is recorded through an interview by Walter R. Hearn, "An Interview with Bernard Ramm and Alta Ramm," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 31, no. 4 (1979): 179–86.
- ²³Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind," 23–24.
- ²⁴Olson, "Bernard Ramm" in *20th-Century Theology*, 308–9.
- ²⁵Ramm, "The Making of an Evangelical Mind," 66.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, 2.
- ²⁷The dating of the emergence of neo-evangelicalism is based on the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). Use of the term "fundamentalist" (spelled with a lower case "f") is to speak broadly of those who claimed to adhere to the five fundamentals (inerrancy, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and visible return of Jesus) as well as those who identified with the teachings included in the multivolume *The*

Article

Bernard Ramm's Scientific Approach to Theology

Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth, vols. 1–7, (Chicago, IL: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910), published by the Stewart brothers between 1910 and 1915. A subset of this group became militantly separatist regarding other Christians and the broader American culture.

²⁸For a detailed description of this movement away from the culture, see Matthew Avery Sutton's *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

²⁹A lengthy treatise on American Fundamentalism can be found in George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) and ____, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), as well as in Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), which describes Fundamentalist withdrawal and separatism versus evangelical engagement with the culture.

³⁰Using their own term of self-identification, “evangelical” will be used to describe those in the neo-evangelical movement, though they should be distinguished from the broader evangelical movement, which historians have traced back for several centuries in Western Christianity. For an example of the broader evangelical movement in the English-speaking world, see the 5-volume series *A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements and Ideas in the English-Speaking World*, ed. David W. Bebbington and Mark A. Noll (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2013, not yet published). Marsden's text *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* distinguishes between the two, pointing out characteristics of each.

³¹One example of many histories attempting to trace the neo-evangelical movement can be found in George Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

³²A forthcoming dissertation by the author on Bernard Ramm and his role in bringing evangelical ideas into the ABC, “A Critical Biography of Bernard Ramm: An Exemplar of the Development of an Evangelical Baptist Identity in the American Baptist Convention,” will include a discussion of the NAE and the reasons for ABC nonmembership.

³³Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), 128–29. Though this book was published in 1973, Ramm reflects on the evangelical positions that he began to embrace during the 1950s and 1960s.

³⁴Ramm, “The Making of an Evangelical Mind,” 22.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 33. In Walter Hearn's interview, Ramm reveals that “hyperorthodox” is Ramm's term for fundamentalists. Walter Hearn, “An Interview with Bernard Ramm and Alta Ramm,” 182.

³⁶Ramm as quoted in R. Albert Mohler, “Bernard Ramm: Karl Barth and the Future of American Evangelicalism,” in *Perspectives on Theology in the Contemporary World: Essays in Honor of Bernard Ramm*, ed. Stanley J. Grenz (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990), 31.

³⁷Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 9–10.

³⁸Alan Day, “Bernard L. Ramm,” in *Baptist Theologians*, ed. David S. Dockery and Timothy F. George (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1990), 588–605.

³⁹Ramm, “The Making of an Evangelical Mind,” 24.

⁴⁰Bernard Ramm, “The Catholic Approach to Bible and Science,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111, no. 443 (1954): 212. Italics original.

⁴¹Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1982), 10.

⁴²Clark H. Pinnock, “Bernard Ramm: Postfundamentalist Coming to Terms with Modernity,” in *Perspectives on Theology in the Contemporary World*, ed. Grenz, 17.

⁴³Ramm notes his encounter with Karl Barth in many of his articles and books, such as *The Evangelical Heritage* and *After Fundamentalism*, and detailing them here would be cumbersome. It is sufficient to say that Ramm deeply respected and appreciated the time he spent with Barth as well as the ways in which he believed that Barth opened intellectual avenues of exploration.

⁴⁴Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage*, 109.

⁴⁵Bernard Ramm, “Helps from Karl Barth,” in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 121.

⁴⁶Ramm, “Helps from Karl Barth,” 121.

⁴⁷Clark H. Pinnock, “Bernard Ramm: Postfundamentalist Coming to Terms with Modernity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 17, no. 4 (1990): 17.

⁴⁸Joseph L. Spradley, “Changing Views of Science and Scripture: Bernard Ramm and the ASA,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 44, no. 1 (1992): 2.

⁴⁹See Bernard Ramm, “Theological Reactions to the Theory of Evolution,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 15, no. 3 (1963): 71–77; ____, “The Relationship of Science, Factual Statements and the Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 21, no. 4 (1969): 98–124; ____, “Evangelical Theology and Technological Shock,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 23, no. 2 (1971): 52–56; ____, “A Christian Definition of Death,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 25, no. 2 (1973): 56–60; ____, “An Ethical Evaluation of Biogenetic Engineering,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 26, no. 4 (1974): 137–43; and ____, “Evil and/or Sin Inherently Irrational,” *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 27, no. 4 (1975): 172.

⁵⁰Bernard Ramm, “Science vs. Theology: The Battle Isn't Over Yet,” *Eternity* 16 (October 1965): 16–20; ____, “Is Science Knowledge?” *Eternity* 17 (June 1966): 35–36; ____, “Is Keeping People Alive Unethical?” *Eternity* 27 (February 1976): 44; and ____, “Amniocentesis—Its Potential Abuse,” *Eternity* 27 (April 1976): 47–48.

⁵¹Ramm, “The Making of an Evangelical Mind,” 2.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 44.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁵Spradley, “Changing Views of Science and Scripture: Bernard Ramm and the ASA,” 2.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷The December 1979 issue of the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* contained a Festschrift dedicated to Bernard Ramm.

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