

H. Evan Runner: The Heart of his Vision

Commencement Address for Edinburgh Theological Seminary
Kerry Hollingsworth, Ph.D.
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Mr. President, esteemed board of trustees, members of the faculty, our honored graduates and their families, special guests:

IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE to share this very special time of celebration with all of you today particularly given the honor that you bestow upon me on this occasion. Allow me to offer my sincere gratitude to Edinburg Theological Seminary for this singular honor and to say that I am greatly heartened by the criteria that the faculty and trustees employ for choosing their conferrals. Dr. Roberts summed up those criteria quite beautifully in the phrase “fidelity in service of a transforming vision.” I trust that each of us in this room committed to the service of the transforming vision of the Gospel of Jesus Christ will remember this Commencement as the day when we all renewed our commitment to that fidelity of service. When we all finally meet with our Saviour, the only thing that will stand in that day will be whether or not we were “good and faithful servants,” whether we maintained a steadfast “fidelity in service of that transforming vision.”

This afternoon I want to paint a rather impressionistic picture (as apposed to a somewhat more Rembrandt-esque version) of a man who demonstrated exactly what that “steadfast fidelity to the transforming power of the gospel” really means, a man who could indeed be described in terms of the scenes painted so dramatically in I Kings 18:20 through 19:18, at least analogically, as something of a modern Elijah. We live in an age where the modern prophets of Baal are still telling us everywhere what their gods can do, and hence, I always feel that these scenes in Kings are forever contemporary. Of course these modern prophets consistently fail to produce the fire that would prove their case.

Instead we are left only with empty glitz, glamour, and the cult of personality, the substitution of information for knowledge, and the reduction of all knowledge to one or another immanent aspect of creation.

But it also appears that there are very few Elijahs to be found in our present world, men who are willing to challenge the prevailing idols and to point to the Creator of all things, and demonstrate how we must Walk In The Way of The Word. If anyone would qualify as an analogue of the prophet Elijah, then, I repeat, it would certainly be H. Evan Runner.

Fundamental to Prof Runner’s challenge to the modern priests of Baal, as well as the idols within the Body of Christ, was his constant repetition of the Scriptural affirmations about the centrality of the heart as the focal point of man’s root religious direction. There are actually 726 references to the heart in Scripture, passages such as Ec. 3:11, where it notes that even though God “has set eternity into the *heart* of man,” it nevertheless appears that man still cannot fathom the depth of the wisdom of His creation. Then to Prov. 4:23, where it states that we all must “Watch over our *heart* with all diligence, for out of the *heart* are the issues of life,” Prov. 16:21, “The wise in *heart* will be called discerning, or Prov. 23:15, where the Lord says, “My son, if your *heart* is wise, My own *heart* also will be glad.” Prov. 23:26, “My son, give me your *heart*.”

Then to Jer. 17:9, "The *heart* is more deceitful than all else and is desperately corrupt, who can know it?" Ezek. 3:10, "take into your *heart* all my words which I will speak unto you." Mark 12:30, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*." And finally Eph. 1:18, "I pray that the eyes of your *heart* may be enlightened."

In order to have the "eyes of your heart enlightened," your heart needs to be open to allow the Word of God to direct all the "issues of life" from anthropology to zoology. On this point Runner was relentless. No matter whether he was lecturing, writing, or speaking to the general public, he would bring you back to this central affirmation of Scripture, "*My son, give me your heart.*" If you once caught the central message that "the issues of life" are heart conditions that reveal the true root religious direction of those issues, then philosophical analysis become significantly more penetrating, and significantly broader in scope. This is what Runner meant by his oft quoted phrase, "Life is religion." It was as simple as that, but it was also as cosmically comprehensive as that.

In the following remarks, then, I will briefly survey the unusual range of his work, say something about Prof. Runner's background and development, and then summarize the heart of his work.

Both the appeal, as well as the nature of Prof. Runner's work, admits of a significantly broad range. He was a philosopher and historian with an encyclopedic grasp of the special sciences. Because he always drove to the heart of the matter before him, he sometimes evoked a confusing array of contradictory allegations, particularly from his critics. Some saw him as just a prophetic visionary; others as an obsessive historically grounded systematic philosopher. There are thousands that knew Dr. Runner as an enormously energetic and movingly provocative classroom teacher. A smaller group knew Runner as a dedicated Encyclopedist, while an even smaller handful would speak in awe of Runner's philological prowess. (He was an assistant to the world's foremost Classicist at Harvard University in his student days) Both his students and the public alike witnessed many demonstrations of his ability to convey the subtleties of Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, and of course, numerous modern languages. Among the general public in Reformed circles Runner was perhaps seen more as a moving charismatic speaker. To yet others he was a compelling strategic leader and keenly insightful policy strategist for numerous Christian organizations such as the Christian Labor Association of Canada, the Association For Public Justice in this country, or the Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands.

Of those many thousands of students that went through his classrooms, a significant number speak of him to this day as a trusted confidant and personal counselor, a role he took very seriously. It was a relationship that continued to have an impact upon numerous of his students deep into their adult lives and careers.

All those who really knew Prof. Runner for any length of time speak with an unequivocal voice about the singular characteristic that permeated his life and work, namely, his transparently simple faith. Runner was a remarkably complicated man possessed of significant encyclopedic interests that were always in process of systematic formation. It was often a very pleasant surprise, then, but also very reassuring to those who had simply seen him as the impressive historically oriented philosopher, to be confronted with such a down to earth unwavering faith. It was this always transparent, down to earth faith that enabled Prof. Runner to connect on a fundamental heart level with both students and the general public alike.

Perhaps the role that most people would find the most difficult to imagine, particularly his students, however, was Runner the grandfather. Indeed, for his grandchildren, this is the only role they know and love. It was a role he was good at, as my own daughter can testify.

I expect that Dr. Runner is best known, however, as a highly energetic and captivatingly dynamic classroom teacher. In his very early days as a high-school Latin teacher he was actually known to have put one table on top of another and then place a chair on top of the table from which he would then teach Latin declensions. (*Amo, Amas, Amant, Amantis*, etc.) He told me once with a bit of a wicked smile, that this approach usually kept the student's attention.

On any pleasant afternoon on the old campus of Calvin College when the windows were wide open in Room 32, almost anyone could easily become auditors of his lectures by merely stretching out on the lawn below and take in his entire presentation. Students never complained that they could not hear him, even those who habitually inhabited the rear of the classroom. Runner knew how to both grasp, and hold your attention, even the attention of the most ardent cynic. There were always some students that entered his classrooms full of the most preposterous notions of what this "crazy guy who wants to change the world" was all about. Changing the world in a coherent Christian manner has always appeared to be a rather crazy notion, and nowhere did it seem more crazy than in the middle of a Reformed academic institution that was ostensibly dedicated to that endeavor.

But then Runner did not just announce his good intentions on the first day of class and then proceed to teach the status quo of the discipline. Runner told you right up front that you were going to be presented with a systematically coherent Christian view of philosophy that could provide a comprehensive entrée to every square inch of God's creation. And that is precisely what you got, whether you liked it or not. And many did not like it. Many students clearly understood that to embrace a coherent Christian position would in fact exclude them from a variety of prestigious circles. And they were quite right. Consequently, Runner's classes tended to attract either very dedicated Christian students, or a broad coterie of what the sociologists refer to as "outliers." Those students who fell more into the center of the curve often felt a little uncomfortable. It was difficult to be a fence-sitter in Runner's class. Even had no love of sitting on fences whatever, it was always way too uncomfortable. His philosophical articulations were not of the Socratic variety where all arguments were democratically presented for the student's pleasure and possible choice, rather like perusing and choosing the ripest tomatoes at the farmer's market. What you got from Runner was a perspective derived from a heart committed to listening to the Word of God. Prof. Runner's lectures were always characterized by their compelling exposition of the "heart condition" of mankind that I spoke of earlier. He constantly brought you back to the radical root religious direction that drives everyone, Christian and non-Christian without exception. Hence, it was very difficult to remain on the fence during these heart to heart orations.

But there was a way to escape the impact of his penetrating appeals. Students simply declared him to be a "fanatic," to be crazy, or whatever other epithet allowed for a suitable face-saving withdrawal from the scene of battle. For, make no mistake, Runner's classes were indeed a real battle zone. Looking back after more than forty years I realize just how profoundly real, and how intensely significant was that battle field in which "the principalities and cosmic powers over this present darkness" were consistently exposed by the light of the Word of God. Engaging in coherent Christian philosophy is not for sissies. It demands a level of commitment that very few

wish to embrace. And while a number of highly competent young men and woman did indeed embrace the challenge, a much larger number felt the burden to be too great.

It is not difficult to live with power, riches, status and the acceptance of all those who are said to “really count” in this world. But if you have something of the integrity evoked by a commitment to the Word of God, then it is another thing altogether to be able to live with yourself in the face of these commitments, to know in your heart that you had chosen the right path in the eyes of the only one at the end of the day who really counts. Again, understand that I am not saying that this is an easy choice, a nice cut and dried straight forward decision. On the contrary, I am simply suggesting that such a commitment entails significant consequences. I make these particular remarks on this Commencement day to again suggest to you that “Walking in The Way of The Word” may well be more than just tough, but it yields an inner integrity that allows you to both live with yourself, and with God, in “good conscience.”

This brief description tells us something about the Runner that some of us are familiar with. But the road taken to obtain the clarion expressions of the high days of his career was, however, long and tortuous. It began in the blue collar district of Philadelphia where Howard Evan Runner was a member of an evangelical Presbyterian church that had been strongly influenced by Westminster Theological Seminary, in particular by Machen and Van Til. The inner journey that the young Runner took from his Wheaton College days in 1935 through Harvard University in 1945 had been excruciatingly difficult for this highly sensitive, intelligent only child. He was from his early teen years not just a typically serious evangelical, but a very studious evangelical. The more he read, the more he began to feel a significant gulf fixed between what the Scriptures appeared to be saying and what the institutional church seemed to be saying. He was both historically and philosophically inclined by nature and spent a great deal of time haunting Philadelphia’s great libraries. These activities only exacerbated his discomfort. His final year at Wheaton was exceptionally tumultuous as by this time he had grown to see that there was an enormous disjunct between the self-understanding of the institutional church and the fundamental ground motives of Scripture. It was also clear to him that his particular sensibilities were not shared by the majority of the faculty.

In 1939 Runner spent six months studying church history and dogmatics in Kampen, in The Netherlands, at the suggestion of Case Van Til. Before the War broke on his studies it began to dawn on him why the theological and philosophical traditions could interact so comfortably together. From the very beginnings of the attempts to articulate the self-understanding of the Body of Christ, the “Church Fathers” had little by little accommodated the “transforming vision of the Gospel” to philosophical expressions that demonstrated a religious direction wholly at odds with the Biblical themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Renewal. The fact of the matter was that the essential elements of the fundamental vocabulary of the ecclesiastical/theological tradition had been permeated by expressions that were either directly or inferentially derived from the central driving force of Classical and Hellenistic culture. This fundamental clash between Athens and Jerusalem was to occupy his attention for the rest of his life. The continuously increasing clarity and incisiveness with which he articulated these issues and their consequences, provided a constant stream of opposition and attack from those who were quite comfortable with the status quo, and by the end of his career, left him quite exhausted. Confronting idols within the Body of Christ is sometimes more difficult than confronting the idols outside of the Body of Christ.

What was, and still is, at issue is the following. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle it was asserted that in order to properly understand a given issue, you need to employ theoretical concepts that will yield a systematic understanding of that issue. Absent a theoretical method, one is at best merely describing the issue, but certainly not explaining it. This latter affirmation of the Western tradition, the idea of “theoretical understanding” embodied in the terms μ and $\ast+,-+$. has been the driving power that has brought the West to its present place of predominance in the world. It is this tradition of critical reason that has also been an intimate part of the development of the systematic theological expressions of the historical unfolding of the institutional church. One such example can be seen in the profound influence of Philo of Alexandria, which led to the adoption of this philosophical tradition as an *ancilla theologiae*, a handmaid to theology. Unfortunately, the handmaid rapidly took over the function of master from the very beginnings of the attempt to formulate the self-understanding of the institutional church. By the fourth century this “master” was firmly in control and was the “hidden hand,” that directed all subsequent theological/ecclesiastical formulations. To call such a deeply embedded formative technical achievement into question after two thousand years of dominance in the institutional expressions of the church, was to call into question the accumulated wisdom of both the church and the Western intellectual tradition. Such questioning would not be taken lightly.

But just as disturbing as the realization of the ancient collusion of Athens with Jerusalem, was the clear and present sense that the great minds of the Christian tradition had, and were, willfully continuing to accommodate to this long history of synthesis thought. Some, such as his Harvard mentor Werner Jaeger, even insisted that the synthesis of Greek and Christian sensibilities was a good thing in that the “Early Church Fathers” had in many cases wisely chosen to attach the high cultural ethos of classical Greece to the Christian ethos, thus synthesizing the best of both worlds.

Slowly on he became convinced that the meaning of the present state of the Body of Christ was impossible to grasp without a substantial insight into the self-understanding of the institutional church as expressed in the early original sources. It became the central mission of his early work to understand these sources. But, to reiterate, the more he entered into the fundamental heart of these sources the more he became disturbed by the disjunction between the religious root direction that permeated the declarations of Scripture, and the antithetical religious direction that, with increasing alarm, he saw emerging from the sources. Here in the early “theological” expressions of the “Fathers” and the subsequent unfolding of the life of the Body of Christ down to the present, was a grand synthesis of opposing spirits, two distinct faith communities, two fundamental cultural powers that had somehow managed to amalgamate into the hybrid condition of nature and grace that dominated the Western cultural tradition into the latter part of the nineteenth century. To expose this grand synthesis, and to call for a systematically coherent Christian philosophical enterprise to replace this tradition was to invite total warfare.

At this point one must surely ask why is it that so few thinkers have seen, or are willing to see the point here? Why is it that the largest majority of the great historians, philosophers, and cultural critics almost always only see the various species of trees and more often than not fail to grasp the nature of the forest? The great Roman Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan had a rather interesting diagnosis for this latter condition. He called it *scotosis*, a Greek term (used widely in the New Testament) that conveys the idea of willing complicity in the darkening of the mind, in the refusal to think in fundamental terms, in the deliberate eclipse of reality. The Scripture uses the term many times in the New Testament to describe pretty much the same

phenomena. It appears, then, that *scotosis* is a condition that can afflict all of mankind before they are enlightened by the Light that the darkness cannot overcome, namely “The Light of the world.”

It would appear, however, that the light, from time to time, penetrates deeper and broader with some individuals. Some individuals seem to be able to survey a given condition and immediately “know” in their heart the fundamental religious direction of the phenomena before them. H. Evan Runner was such a person. Such men are few and far between; and they are invariably troublemakers, just like Elijah. They are troublemakers because they want to challenge the status quo, they want to “suggest” an alternative view, they want to go down deep into the heart of the issue before them.

But then, when you insist on driving to the heart of the issue, what you really want to do is to say something fundamental about the nature of the forest, and pass by, for the moment, the individual trees. Why? Because the obsessive focus on this or that species of tree, can in fact cause an even greater disease than *scotosis*, it can cause complete blindness. Without the light of the Word of God the darkened mind refuses to acknowledge that the whole of creation is upheld by the power of that Word. It refuses to acknowledge that the entire cosmos is structured by God’s law for creaturely functioning. This means that we need to pay just as much attention to the forest as we do to the trees in the forest, because you cannot understand one without the other. Just as the Word of God is One Word, so too the Creation of God is One Creation where “everything coheres In Christ.”

Now if indeed “all things cohere in Christ,” then there is not one single aspect of creation that could possibly be excluded from that totality of things that hang together in Christ. If, to cite Col. 1:17-19 then, there is in fact absolutely nothing in the creation order that is not open to an ordered and articulated Biblically driven analysis.

When Runner said “Life” is religion, he meant absolutely every conceivable aspect of our lives. His vision for the world really did encompass the whole world, our biotic and psychical lives, our logical and lingual lives, our social and economic lives, our aesthetic, legal, and ethical lives, as well as our functional life of faith must be driven at the root level by the light of the Word of God. Every functional aspect of our experience before the face of God is to be expressed as the heart’s loving obedience toward the Word of God for our lives and cannot be reduced to some creational dimension, some almighty individual sovereign tree, such as our logical functioning, our lingual functioning, or whatever other created idol is offered in place of the Word of God. It is a COSMIC VISION that the Gospel of Jesus Christ bids us to embrace. Runner worked tirelessly to articulate precisely this cosmic vision.

What became increasingly clear to Runner was that the world academic community had deliberately conspired to become a society of horticulturists in which everyone had claimed this or that tree, bush, or plant as their own special project. Some claimed that the Giant Oaks were the heart of the forest, others the Redwoods. This one had yet another candidate, that one, another still yet. The net result, however, was that the forest itself was completely lost in the specialized pursuit of individual species. The truth of the matter was that the horticulturists were really insisting that there was actually nothing to really examine in this world except the specific individual trees. When you had explained the specific individual trees in a circumscribed rational analysis, you had explained all there was to know.

We are presently demonstrably drowning in an ocean of “information” generated by the deliberately darkened pursuit of specialization to the abandonment of all else. I say that this is a deliberate pursuit because the Western tradition of critical reason simply will not allow that there is anything at all valid outside of the domain of theoretical method that can be recognized as true knowledge. Hence, the authority of the institutional church is largely reduced to speaking to “the faithful,” while the “real issues of mankind” are left to the prophets of Baal. Unfortunately, at the beginning of the twenty first century, the Body of Christ finds itself increasingly unable to defend itself from the ubiquitously shrill cries of media savvy ideologues such as Richard Dawkins, Steven Weinberg, Steven Hawkins and the suchlike who insist that we abandon the “outdated superstitions of religion” and embrace “the clarity of reason.”

And herein lies the fundamental problem that has bedeviled the Body of Christ, and has completely dominated the non-Christian community. Both communities have chronically and consistently succumbed to what is nothing more than a confession of faith, namely, that only conceptual knowledge (logical analysis, scientific method, critical reason, etc.) will be recognized as true and valid knowledge. While the Fathers of the Church pursued the honorable goal of attempting to express the faith at a level equal to that of the best expressions of paganism, they little by little “borrowed” so much of the conceptual knowledge of the Hellenic tradition, that after a few centuries they were so locked into the conceptual expressions of the tradition of reason that by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the interpretation of Scripture, and hence the formulation of theological thought was determined essentially by the criterion of critical reason, rather than the creaturely function of analysis being driven by the ground motives of creation, fall, redemption, and renewal.

To reiterate, then, because the “Early Church Fathers” had unwittingly brought the principle of the sovereignty of reason in through the back door, it was only a matter of time before that very principle would rise up and direct the interpretation of the ground motives of Scripture. Once it was clear that what the Christian theologians and philosophers were saying was in fact “concordant” with the “discourse of modernity” the “necessity of Revelation” was discarded, and the authority of the institutional church would be thrown out through its own front door. This condition left the general Body of Christ to submit to the principle of rational analysis if it was to be heard, let alone be recognized as saying anything legitimate.

The real tree huggers, the horticulturists, actually provide the world on all too many occasions with not a great deal more than exquisitely nuanced catalogues of individual trees. And the cataloguing goes on, regardless of the fact that the best of the horticulturists do, in a reactionary sort of way, recognize that there is a forest out there that they can actually see. But to admit that the forest is actually the unity of all the trees, would be to admit that there might be a forester out there who created the forest. All that can be admitted by those suffering from *scotosis* is that the forest is nothing more than the theoretical unity of the trees. Beyond that affirmation theoretical thought is stuck in its own dogmatic assertions. It is simply incapable of asking any real questions about the true origin of theoretical thought because that would force them beyond the immanent order of creation. I believe that it was Albert Camus that made the telling remark that *la recherche de la paternité est interdite*, [the search for origins is forbidden.] In other words, we may not go back to some mythical provenance, and we may not look forward to an eschatology where all will somehow be made right again. All that we may properly engage in is what we can see before us, the immanent condition of the here and now. This is the real

dogmatism of the darkened mind. If it is not capable of being grasped empirically, then it simply does not count as “authentic.” It is simply nonsense.

What Runner taught us is that we must not deify our God- given task of logical analysis by elevating it to the place of law- giver for the life of mankind. He taught us to employ our logical/ analytical functionality to distinguish the various elements that the “eyes of our heart” has already discerned and chosen regarding a given “issue of life.” What he insisted we needed to learn, is the proper relationship of systematic analysis to its true origin, and not pretend that the creature can speak for the Creator, or that whatever does not conform to the word of man, including the Word of God, must be excluded from the realm of legitimate discourse.

Only by adopting a systematically coherent Christian philosophy that recognizes that the creation and its creatures find their way in this world by listening with a heart open to hear the direction that the Word of The Lord gives to us for every aspect of our lives, can we hope to open up the rich diversity of the creation in a normative manner. By acknowledging the true origin of our creatureliness, we can give due recognition to both conceptual knowledge as well as concept transcending knowledge. That way there is no necessary conflict between the revelational Word of God and the analytical words of man.