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BULLETIN

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Comments from Reader Surveys

"I am often frustrated by TSF Bulletin. Many of the articles are next to worthless. Seldom, if ever, does the Bulletin deal with social/corporate dimensions of sin. The Bulletin is not on the cutting edge of theology and its concrete impact, especially in the cities. You need to stop fighting 'liberals' and get on with the kingdom."

"It is too critical of those more conservative and not critical enough of those more liberal—the conservative/liberal dichotomy is valid if there is any truth. Not all who attend conservative schools are Pavlovian in nature—we think too."

"I like the teachable attitude toward a variety of sources. You haven't 'written off' any perspective. I appreciate the emphasis on social justice and spiritual life, too."

"The breathless preoccupation with popular theological issues is wearisome at times, but maybe it is necessary in a mag for students."

"Some of the issues of the seminary world are non-issues in the pastorate or in missions. I suspect the faddishness of theological currents."

"It gets me out of my own little rut and helps me see what is happening on the road. It forces me to think in realms that I would not normally be obligated to."

"[What I like least is the] news from TSF chapters."

"[What I like least are the] articles on spirituality, because I feel I can get material for spiritual life from other sources; focus on what you do best."

"Not enough practical and spiritual formation materials. Not enough on local chapters."

"Have a larger . . . section on spiritual formation, for this area seems to be the most difficult area for the seminarian to deal with—whether s/he knows it or not."

"Even in its intellectually stimulating articles, TSF pastors me, cutting through the murky waters of contemporary theology with refreshing affirmations of our living, self-revealing Lord."

"I found TSF Bulletin a shade too pedantic, a little cliqueish, and overall not interesting enough to do more than glance at a few articles, read some book reviews, and throw on a pile to read later."

"I appreciate the openness to other points of view, yet the solidly orthodox, evangelical stance of the Bulletin."

"I think the 'liberal leaning' stance I sense is appropriate to get all we can from what liberal brothers and sisters . . . have to share with the body of Christ—but the ignoring of more conservative evangelical elements is an emotional bias, I believe."

"The prideful arrogance which is traditional to evangelicals rears its ugly head."

"I would like to see more discussions of the substantive differences between 'evangelical,' 'neo-orthodox,' and 'liberal' theology (without repeating the biblical authority questions)."

"[I like least the] very spotty coverage by, about, for women and minorities. This is a constant irritant. Your commitment to this needs to be more obvious."

"Since you give so much space to feminist ax-grinding, why not challenge a reputable scholar who is not enamored of current views to ordain women to contribute an article on the subject?"

TSF Bulletin Readers

This summer TSF office staff were encouraged and overwhelmed by the reader surveys we received. The response rate was over ten percent, much higher than expected. Several readers complained that the survey was too complex; this summer we paid the penalty for our extravagance: we have had to analyze the complex results! We are not finished, but some of the preliminary results are certainly interesting enough to report.

We enjoyed reading and learning from the comments. These reminded us again what a diverse group of people we are. What one survey singled out for glowing praise would be roundly condemned by the next. One reader would be sure that we are erring in one direction, and another would accuse us of precisely the opposite heresy. We want to share with you the experience of seeing what other readers said, so we have provided here a sampling of the more interesting comments.

In spite of such contrasting reactions, there were still some areas of strong agreement. It is quite clear that most readers consider the bibliographic resources provided by the *Bulletin* to be of first importance. Book reviews were mentioned as a chief reason for reading the journal more frequently than any other. There was also a very definite preference for more tear-out bibliographies, more review articles, and more notes about worthwhile articles in other publications. These bibliographic materials have been a major emphasis for us because seminary students need help gaining access to the best resources. We will continue to work for improvement in this area.

We are now actively seeking a larger number of tear-out bibliographies and survey review articles to publish as the year proceeds. We welcome suggestions from you about what areas are most important to cover in this way. Providing leads on noteworthy articles in other publications will be a little more difficult. In past years we have not had a good system for compiling this information, and it seemed to be more trouble than it was worth. We were surprised to find in the reader surveys how strongly you want more of this, and so we will renew efforts to develop a good system for providing it.

Beginning last spring we have been evaluating our strategy for selecting and publishing book reviews. Since many readers seem somewhat dissatisfied with the short reviews, we should clarify our purpose for including both short and long reviews. By increasing the number of books which receive only short reviews, we are attempting to insure that there is plenty of space for the most important books to receive full reviews. As far as possible, only those books which are receiving wide attention in the seminary world, or which *should be* receiving wide attention but are not, will receive long reviews containing real analysis and critique. Shorter reviews will be given those books which are of narrower interest, and will provide only basic information and some positioning of the books within their fields. This way we can provide resources to a broader spectrum of interest while still focusing on the books of greater general interest. We also seek to be encouraging serious interaction with current literature by welcoming contributions from student reviewers.

The surveys indicated wide agreement among readers concerning the need for more articles "on recent scholarly developments in theology and biblical studies," more articles "describing aspects of the theological task," and "more analyses of theological issues currently being debated." These are important concerns for those trying to discern the role of theology in the church. We will try to provide more in these areas. Several of the articles in this current issue do fall into these categories: Pinnock's discussion of using tradition as one aspect of the theological task; Perkins discussion of the implications of recent developments in Gnostic research; and Branson's report on continuing debates within evangelical theology on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility.

Several other trends in the reader survey have been thought-provoking for the editors. Although there was great variety in the issues being debated on campus (which reminds us again of the diversity

Unity and Diversity

within the church and within our own readership) there were some "big issues." Most frequently mentioned were concerns about nuclear war or militarism in general. This is a hot topic not only at mainline denominational seminaries, but also at evangelical schools. This change from earlier years indicates that students and church people are realizing their responsibility to be involved in the grave issues facing the world. We are planning a major article on the nuclear issue in one of the next few issues of the *Bulletin*. Both mainline and evangelical seminaries were also reported to be wrestling with questions of women in ministry. There are also some issues receiving attention at evangelical schools but not at mainline schools. These include inerrancy, a wide range of particular doctrinal debates, and issues in world missions. Apparently in spite of recent efforts by mainline seminaries to increase their emphasis on evangelism and missions, there is still not much active debate about what the church's mission is to be. Perhaps articles in *TSF Bulletin* can serve to stimulate more discussion in this area.

It was intriguing to note that the most read articles last year were the report on the Harvard/Gordon Conwell Dialogue, Branson's editorial on fundamentalism ("left and right") and Pinnock's editorial about a loss of focus in mainline theological education. Even though many readers are vocal in their concern that *TSF Bulletin* is either too liberal or too conservative, everybody seems interested in understanding what these labels and categories mean. What is going on in theology now that the old labels are wearing out and losing their usefulness? Today's students will become pastors who are products of this new transition period in church history. We need to be talking to one another. We need to begin dealing with our respective strengths and weaknesses. *TSF* can play an important role by serving students and seminaries who are facing these new questions. Students should be sponsoring more dialogues and discussions like the one reported last year. We would be delighted to receive tapes or accounts of these so a wider audience can listen in. *TSF Bulletin* can also continue to help interpret these developments through book reviews and articles. For instance, Pinnock's article on tradition, originally delivered as a paper to the American Theological Society, is one attempt to take a fresh look at an old issue in light of the current situation.

A final item of interest: after book reviews, the most frequently mentioned reason for reading the *TSF Bulletin* was its evangelical outlook. These readers were looking to the journal for resources in conservative biblical scholarship, for insights into the contributions of evangelical theology, or for a sense of fellowship with other evangelical students. This may be, therefore, the appropriate occasion to reaffirm our self-identity. *TSF Bulletin* is a journal of *evangelical* thought, *TSF* is a group committed to maintaining the essential vitality of classical orthodox Christian faith, as well as to integrating theology with spirituality and mission.

Nevertheless, there continues to be great diversity among our readers. The cutting edge issues of faithfulness can vary at different schools and in different denominations. The reader surveys show this very clearly. Therefore it would be foolish to believe that *TSF* can always be on those cutting edges for everyone. We do hope to provide resources to the various groups of people who are struggling in their own contexts to be faithful. We trust *TSF Bulletin* will be used by them. But, in the final analysis, it falls to each group of people to discern in its own place what are the central issues and the most faithful responses. This is why *TSF* chapters and similar groups are so important. Although organizational news is not the most popular feature of *TSF Bulletin*, we hope that groups can be an encouragement, inspiration, and example to each other through our pages. In this issue we are providing the first of a series of articles describing what groups (whether *TSF* or not) can do to be faithful servants where they are. We offer all this with the hope that bits and pieces of it can become nourishment for the kingdom.

—John Duff

"I like the international character of the various issues addressed; those have expanded my sense of evangelical theological fellowship worldwide."

*"A section for doctoral candidates would be very special, even if it were only one page. How do other Ph.D. candidates struggle with issues such as: narrowing their focus for teaching and research specialization; determining and choosing teaching possibilities; necessary 'compromise' between the need to get the degree as soon as possible and the ideal of obtaining the most thorough training and excelling in all aspects while a student?" "It would be helpful to know of thesis/dissertation work being done at various seminaries that could be shared with other students. *TSF* could be the means of communication between them."*

*"[*TSF Bulletin*] does not come as often or contain as many articles as I would like, but I understand your limitations." "Too few issues." "Not long enough! A thousand pages will do!" "Can it be published monthly?"*

"I appreciate the limited number of issues. I get swamped with weeklies and biweeklies, and even monthlies."

"Sometimes I detect a somewhat truncated or distorted understanding of (or view towards) those of the more conservative wing of evangelical scholarship. As a case in point, perhaps one could mention your scattered comments regarding the inerrancy debate, which seemed biased against (or smug towards) those who would endorse the ICBI position."

*"Sometimes [*TSF Bulletin* is] too arrogant in its affirmation of evangelical positions."*

*"[I like] the breadth of the issues it addresses. *TSF* is not an exegetical publication, a theological journal, a ministerial journal, a book review digest or a devotional magazine. But, to some extent, it is all of these and more."*

"To tell you the truth—while I have been provoked to thought by your articles, I would say they were not readily 'integratable.' It is nice to stay abreast, but I often find myself shaking my head in disbelief at what I am reading."

"You are a scholarly magazine, but that doesn't mean you have to be heavy and difficult to read. It's a myth that complicated ideas have to be clothed in complicated prose. Lighten up your language and you'll increase your readership without sacrificing academic content."

"It's a nice break from studies and cheaper than National Geographic."

"I enjoy the sense of keeping in touch with other evangelicals, of overcoming the tendency to isolation in a pluralistic school."

"[It] seems a little too 'liberal.' While I realize that this may be necessary to be effective at 'liberal' schools, I feel that too much is sacrificed in the process."

"You don't want to make any waves, I believe, or risk offending anyone. You need a more biblically prophetic voice. Nothing in your publication challenged me last year; it was all to keep me from being offended. Truly there must be something more you wish to say!!"

"It's usually provocative and it doesn't hesitate to attack sacred cows (right or left)."

"Actually I read Themelios more."

*"I did not grow up in an evangelical faith context—but am growing in that direction currently. I appreciate the respect *TSF* shows toward non-evangelical understandings. It gives me hope that bridges can be built—that I do not have to reject my past to remain faithful in theological reflection."*