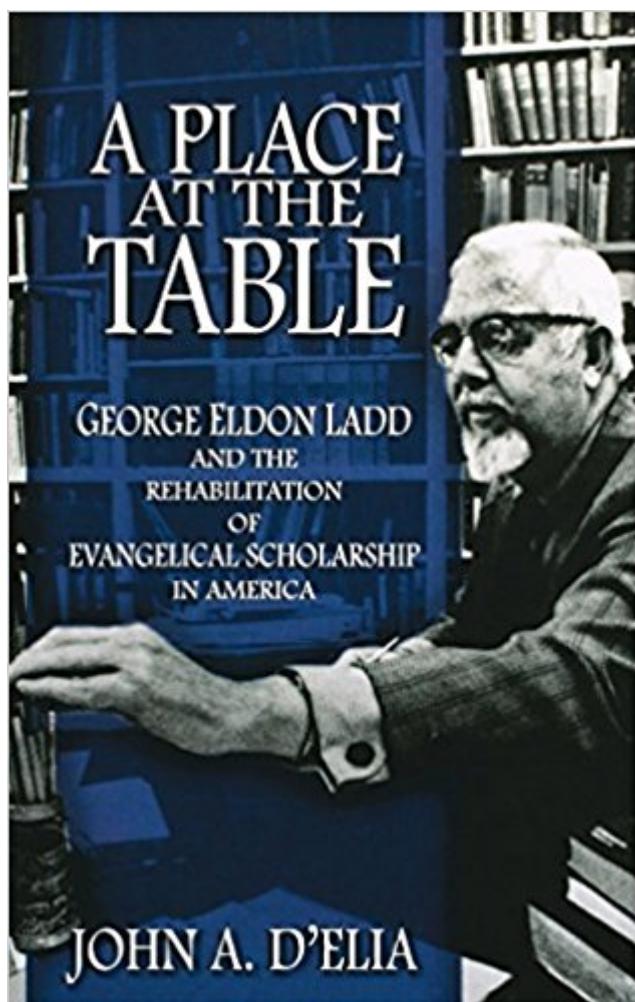


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# A Place At The Table: George Eldon Ladd And The Rehabilitation Of Evangelical Scholarship In America



## Synopsis

George Eldon Ladd was a pivotal figure in the resurgence of evangelical scholarship in America during the years after the Second World War. Ladd's career as a biblical scholar can be seen as a quest to rehabilitate evangelical thought both in content and image, a task he pursued at great personal cost. Best known for his work on the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, Ladd moved from critiquing his own movement to engaging many of the important theological and exegetical issues of his day. Ladd was a strong critic of dispensationalism, the dominant theological system in conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism, challenging what he perceived to be its anti-intellectualism and uncritical approach to the Bible. In his impressive career at Fuller Theological Seminary, Ladd participated in scholarly debates on the relationship between faith and historical understanding, arguing that modern critical methodologies need not preclude orthodox Christian belief. Ladd also engaged the thought of Rudolf Bultmann, the dominant theological figure of his day. Ladd's main focus, however, was to create a work of scholarship from an evangelical perspective that the broader academic world would accept. When he was unsuccessful in this effort, he descended into depression, bitterness, and alcoholism. But Ladd played an important part in opening doors for later generations of evangelical scholars, both by validating and using critical methods in his own scholarly work, and also by entering into dialogue with theologians and theologies outside the evangelical world. It is a central theme of this book that Ladd's achievement, at least in part, can be measured in the number of evangelical scholars who are today active participants in academic life across a broad range of disciplines.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (June 16, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195341678

ISBN-13: 978-0195341676

Product Dimensions: 9.3 x 1.1 x 6.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars 11 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #475,962 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #102 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Fundamentalism #131 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Fundamentalism #222 in Books > Textbooks > Education > History & Theory

## Customer Reviews

"George Ladd was arguably the leading 'new evangelical' biblical scholar in the mid-decades of the twentieth century. He was also a person whose life and work were filled with intriguing tensions and contrasts. John D'Elia tells this poignant and fascinating story well." --George M. Marsden, Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, and author of *Fundamentalism and American Culture*"In this poignant and gracefully written account, John D'Elia unflinchingly but sympathetically recounts the personal and professional torments of George Eldon Ladd. Making extensive use of Ladd's own files, D'Elia sketches the twin paradoxes of Ladd's life: although eager to find 'a place at the table' of the larger scholarly community, Ladd deemed his own efforts towards that end a failure, and although he wrote extensively of the presence of the kingdom, he struggled to taste its fruits in his own life. Ironically, Ladd never truly understood his greatest legacy his crucial role in the development of evangelical biblical scholarship. D'Elia offers a welcome tribute to Ladd's legacy." --Marianne Meye Thompson, George Eldon Ladd Professor of New Testament, Fuller Theological Seminary"D'Elia's biography of George Eldon Ladd is powerful and perceptive. He introduces us to a person who is spiritual and ambitious, intelligent and insecure, bold and troubled all at the same time. This is compelling reading for anyone interested in either the intellectual history of Evangelicalism or the movement's continuing struggle to secure and maintain 'a place at the table' of the mainstream scholarship." --Douglas Jacobsen, Distinguished Professor of Church History and Theology at Messiah College, and author of *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement*

John A. D'Elia is the Senior Minister of the American Church in London. He is a graduate of UCLA, Fuller Theological Seminary, and the University of Stirling in Scotland. He is from Burbank, California.

As a seminary student at Southwestern Seminary, I picked up and read a little 1956 work on eschatology called *The Blessed Hope* written by a theologian named George Eldon Ladd. To borrow that great phrase initially used to describe the effect that Barth's commentary on Romans had on the liberal theology of his day, Ladd's work fell like an atomic bomb on the playground of the dispensationalism in which I had been raised. On hindsight, it did much more than that. His argument against the pretribulation rapture from the position of a lack of historical attestation for that view coincided with a campus visit and lecture from Tom Oden on paleo-orthodoxy. The two combined caused me to have a kind of epiphanious crisis in which I began to understand more

about the importance of historical theology and, more importantly, about what the church is and who God is. (If that doesn't make sense to you, then you may not get the struggle that a lot of people feel when they have grown up in the radically ahistorical confines of free church Southern fundamentalism only to discover the shocking truth that what God did between the close of the canon and your birth actually kind of matters a bit. But more on that later, perhaps.) Anyway, The Blessed Hope was, for me, the death knell of dispensationalism and particularly of the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture. As I've come to know more about the thought of George Eldon Ladd, I've come to appreciate him even more. Now comes John A. D'Elia's fascinating, enthralling, and heartbreakingly honest biography of Ladd: *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America*. It is a simultaneously devastating and sympathetic look at one of the 20th century's greatest Evangelical minds...but not one of its greatest lives. D'Elia reveals a tortured soul: too tall and too skinny as a child, Ladd carried with him the label of "freak" throughout his life. He seems to have been wounded deeply by the early cruelty of the children around him and by the absence of any real fatherly affection. He married a woman who carried similar wounds. Their marriage proved to be deeply troubled. In the midst of this, their son had serious physical and psychological issues, and their daughter harbored deep resentments, apparently, towards her father and his neglect of his son, her brother. Ladd was a deeply flawed individual...which is to say, Ladd was human. It is safe to say that he seriously neglected his family in his relentless pursuit to achieve academic standing and credibility. His life's ambition was to gain respectability for evangelical theology, a noble goal to be sure, but it's hard to distinguish how much of Ladd's goal was the rehabilitation of evangelical theology and how much was the rehabilitation of George Eldon Ladd's self-image. Forever seeking to overcompensate for a fragile image of himself, Ladd hurt those closest to him in ways that are tragic and lamentable. When Ladd's greatest work (in his eyes) was published, a negative review from a liberal scholar (Norman Perrin) sends him into a kind of spiritual, moral, and psychological tailspin that becomes nothing short of bizarre. (D'Elia correctly notes that the review itself could not have done this. Rather, it simply opened a wound out of which poured many of Ladd's long-festering demons.) Eventually, Ladd turned to alcohol and died a broken man. And yet, Ladd produced some of the most influential evangelical works of theology and scholarship in the last one hundred years. Furthermore, D'Elia paradoxically reveals a man who seems to have deeply loved the Lord and treasured the gospel and thrown himself passionately into more than a few noble, commendable, and God-honoring tasks. Ladd even seems to have been aware of his own brokenness and the pain he had caused others, pitifully revealing this fact to audiences of students. What to make of this book? Well, it's a page turner and was very hard for me

to put down. It was not a hit piece in the least (Frank Schaeffer anyone?). It was sympathetic and balanced yet honest and revealing. It is a sad but well-told story. More than that, it is an important story and a powerful cautionary tale. And what to make of Ladd? Ladd was a tragedy in so many ways. He never knew the effect his work had on scores of young ministers and laymen because he was too focused on trying to win the respect of the wider academic world. He never considered that the work he had done would be opening the eyes of young seminarians in 1996 in Ft. Worth, Texas. Was Ladd a believer? Yes, I think he was. Was he deeply flawed? Yes, he clearly was. Does Ladd's work still have value? By all means it does! Should he still be read today? Yes, yes, yes! And can his life serve as a cautionary tale against seeking validation in all the wrong places and losing perspective on what is most important? Indeed it can. I daresay that nobody who reads this work will do so dispassionately. You will be changed by this book. You will see yourself on these pages and you will be warned. You may just have your heart broken...not by Ladd's tragic tale, but by how much you may just see yourself in his story. I daresay that many ministers will resonate with this story of seeking approval, of achieving success, of gaining the respectability of your peers. But hopefully they will be cautioned by this story about the dangers of fixating on these things at the cost of integrity, family, peace, and joy. Above all, this book will help you remember that God works with jars of clay, some of them deeply broken...which is to say, that God loves His people, even, and especially, in their brokenness.

This book is an absolutely fascinating look at the life and academic career of George Eldon Ladd. D'Elia has unprecedented access to primary source material and does an excellent job weaving together an account of Ladd's life. Ladd was driven throughout his career to make a name for himself, as well as a "place at the table" for evangelical scholarship during the emergence of the new evangelicalism. The book emphasizes Ladd's labor to maintain a relatively conservative position in the broader theological world while engaging with that broader theological world in an irenic and constructive manner, providing a model for the new evangelical enterprise which is still followed in evangelicalism today. This volume helped me in several ways. First, it gave me clarity into the relationship between Ladd and dispensationalism / pretribulationism. More than just research topics, these "-isms" were influential in the conservative milieu in which Ladd existed, and which he was actively seeking to reform. On the one hand, he disagreed with both, and sought to persuade others that they were wrongheaded. On the other hand, he was seeking to promote an atmosphere where one was free to dissent on these non-fundamentals without ostracization from one's conservative circles. Particularly enlightening was the portrayal of John Walvoord as a sort of

dispensationalist nemesis to Ladd, with accounts of their interaction. A second way D'Elia helped me was in detailing the failures of Ladd's personal life in his pursuit of scholarship. His academic achievements (which are unarguably significant) came at quite a cost; the book portrays him as a workaholic who estranged his wife and his two children in favor of his ministry duties (to some extent) and his studies (constantly). As well, alcoholism became a significant problem at the end of Ladd's life. Third, the book several times highlights Ladd's careful work in accurately and fairly portraying the opinions of those with whom he disagreed -- and of those with whom he agreed (134). Fourth, D'Elia makes the point at the outset of the book that Ladd was not out merely to "rehabilitate evangelical scholarship" but to gain respectability for himself personally (xvii-xviii). In fact, as I read the work, it seems as if the new evangelical enterprise of finding "a place at the table" was (and I no doubt broad-brush here to some extent) a desire not just to recognize and correct one's own academic shortcomings, and the improvement of the life of one's own mind for the glory of God, but also (and perhaps more) a rather self-focused quest for recognition by the larger scholarly world. I'm sure that for many, there was a sincere desire to speak truth to a broader academic community that has let go of truth, but for others (and certainly for Ladd), there was also/instead a search for personal acceptability by the larger scholarly community. This latter factor is seen very graphically in the devastation wrought to Ladd by Norman Perrin's critical review of Ladd's magnum opus; his entire life went into a tailspin when he did not find the acceptance he craved from the larger scholarly guild. This is a warning call to me; one's ideas and writings are in a way a part of oneself, and I am ever tempted by the siren call of personal respectability and acceptance -- the "approval of men" (Gal 1:10) -- rather than seeking the truth of God for the glory of God.

The many reviews listed here summarize this excellent bibliography well. So I do not need to. But just to add this: if you were a student at Fuller Seminary (as I was) during the 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s, this book will help you not only understand one great scholar's courage and pain, but also you will understand the history of emergent progressive evangelicalism that broke away from fundamentalism in the 1950s. This is an important story each of us needs to know. D'Elia's narrative is well researched, interesting, charitable where it needs to be, and as honest as it ought to be. George Ladd was inspiring to many of us: he was brilliant, emotional, and feared by many graduate students who might arrive in class unprepared. But he was a legendary opponent of dispensationalism and it is to him (and others) that we owe a debt of gratitude for those arenas of evangelical life today that are charitable, open, and engaged with the larger academic world. And he

launched many of us into careers that reflected his commitment to sound theology and scholarship.

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