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Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: *Star Trek* and the Next Generation

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The author illustrates the momentous shift in our society from modernity to postmodernity by comparing the original Star Trek with Star Trek: The Next Generation. He pilots the way through to a Christian world view that critiques both the modernity of the Enlightenment and the postmodernity of the present age.

Editor

The camera focuses on a futuristic space craft against the background of distant galaxies. The narrator's voice proudly recites the guiding dictum: 'Space—the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission—to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.' With these words begins another episode of the popular television series, 'Star Trek: The Next Generation', now in its final season.

In many ways 'The Next Generation' is simply an updated version of the earlier 'Star Trek' series placed in a future era, after the resolution of some of the galactic political difficulties that plagued the universe of the previous space voyagers. Yet, sometime after Jean-Luc Picard's new breed of explorers took over the command of the redesigned Enterprise from Captain Kirk's crew, the creators of the series discovered that the world of their audience was in the midst of a subtle paradigm shift: Modernity was giving birth to postmodernity. As a result, 'The Next Generation' became a reflection—perhaps even a moulder—of the worldview of the emerging generation.

The shifts heralded by the newer Star Trek carry far-reaching implications for evangelical theology. [p. 323](#)

I. THE MOVEMENT FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

Many social observers agree that the Western world is in the midst of a change. In fact, we are apparently experiencing a cultural shift which rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity out of the decay of the Middle Ages—the transition to the postmodern era. Of course, transitional eras are exceedingly difficult to describe and assess. Nor is it fully evident what will characterize the emerging epoch.¹ Nevertheless, we see signs that monumental changes are engulfing all aspects of contemporary culture.

¹ Some thinkers have boldly sought to set forth the new postmodern mood, but these often tend to be projections of the author's own sympathies. For example, McFague includes among the postmodern assumptions 'a greater appreciation for nature, a recognition of the importance of language to human existence, a chastened admiration for technology, an acceptance of the challenge that other religions present to the Judeo-Christian tradition, an apocalyptic sensibility, a sense of the displacement of the white, Western male and the rise of those dispossessed due to gender, race, or class, perhaps most significantly, a growing awareness of the radical interdependence of life at all levels and in every imaginable way' Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), x–xi.

The term 'postmodern' first came into use in the 1930s as the designation for certain developments in the arts.² Later it denoted a new style of architecture. But not until the 1970s did postmodernism gain widespread attention, first as the label for theories expounded in university English and philosophy departments and eventually as the description for a broader cultural phenomenon.

Whatever else it might be, as the name suggests, postmodernism is the quest to move beyond modernism. Specifically, it is a rejection of the modern mindset but under the conditions of modernity. Therefore, to understand postmodern thinking we must view it in the context of the modern world which gave it birth and against which it is reacting.

1. The modern mind

Many historians place the birth of the modern era with the dawn of the Enlightenment which followed the Thirty Years War. The stage, however, was set earlier—in the Renaissance, which elevated humankind to the centre of reality. Characteristic of the new outlook was Francis Bacon's vision of humans exercising power over nature by means of the discovery of nature's secrets.

Building on the Renaissance, the Enlightenment elevated the individual self to the centre of the world.³ The French philosopher Descartes laid the philosophical foundation for the modern edifice with his focus on doubt. This led him to conclude that the thinking self is the first truth which doubt could not deny. (Hence, his reappropriation of Augustine's dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*.) In so doing, Descartes defined human nature as a thinking substance and the human person as an autonomous [p. 324](#) rational subject. The British physicist Isaac Newton later provided the scientific framework for modernity. He pictured the physical world as a machine whose laws and regularity could be discerned by the human mind. The modern human, therefore, is Descartes' autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world.

The postulates of the thinking self and the mechanistic universe opened the way for the explosion of knowledge under the banner of what Juergen Habermas called the 'Enlightenment project'. The goal of the human intellectual quest became that of unlocking the secrets of the universe, in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modernity characteristic of the twentieth century—bringing rational management to life and seeking to improve the quality of life through technology.⁴

At the intellectual foundation of the Enlightenment project are certain epistemological assumptions. Specifically, the modern mind assumes that knowledge is certain, objective,⁵ and good, and that such knowledge is obtainable, at least theoretically.

The demand for certain knowledge sets the modern inquirer in search of a method of demonstrating the essential correctness of philosophic, scientific, religious, moral, and

² Craig Van Gelder, 'Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview', *Calvin Theological Journal* 26/2 (1991): 412.

³ For a short discussion of the Enlightenment period and its impact on Christian theology, see Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

⁴ Van Gelder, 'Postmodernism as an Emerging Worldview', 413.

⁵ James M. Kee, 'Postmodern' Thinking and the Status of the Religions', *Religion and Literature* 22/2–3 (Summer–Autumn 1990), 49.

political doctrines.⁶ The Enlightenment method places the many aspects of reality under the scrutiny and criterion of reason,⁷ resulting in an unchallenged faith in our rational capabilities.

Enlightenment knowledge is not only certain (and hence rational), it is also objective. The assumption of objectivity leads to a claim to dispassionate knowledge. The modern knower professes to stand apart from being a conditioned participant and to be able to view the world as an unconditioned observer,⁸ that is, to peer at the world from a vantage point outside the flux of history. The pursuit of dispassionate knowledge divides the scientific project into separate disciplines⁹ and elevates the specialist, the neutral observer who has gained expertise in a limited field of endeavour.

In addition to being certain and objective, Enlightenment knowledge is inherently good. For this reason, the modern scientist assumes that the discovery of knowledge is a self-evident, unchallengeable axiom. The assumption of the inherent goodness of knowledge also means that the Enlightenment outlook is optimistic. Progress is inevitable, for science coupled with the power of education will eventually free us p. 325 from our vulnerability to nature, as well as from all social bondage.

Enlightenment optimism, coupled with the focus on reason, elevates human freedom. Suspect are all beliefs that seem to curtail autonomy or to be based on some external authority, rather than reason (and experience). The Enlightenment project understands freedom largely in individual terms. In fact, the modern ideal elevates the autonomous self, the self-determining subject who exists outside of tradition or community.¹⁰

Like modern science fiction in general, the original 'Star Trek' series encapsulates many aspects of the Enlightenment project and of late modernity. The crew of the Enterprise included persons of various nationalities working together for the common benefit of humankind. They were the epitome of the modern universalist anthropology. The message was obvious: We are all human. As humans we must overcome our differences and join forces in order to complete our mandate, the quest for certain, objective knowledge of the entire universe of which space looms as 'the final frontier'.

The hero of the old 'Star Trek' was Spock. Although he was the only crew member who came from another planet (Vulcan) his partially alien status actually served as a transcendent human ideal. Spock was the ideal Enlightenment man, completely rational and without emotion (or with his emotions in check). Repeatedly his dispassionate rationality provided the calculative key necessary to solve the problems encountered by

⁶ Richard Luecke, 'The Oral, the Local and the Timely', *Christian Century* (October 3, 1990): 875.

⁷ Klaus Hedwig, 'The Philosophical Presuppositions of Postmodernity', *Communio* 17 (Summer 1990): 168.

⁸ Merold Westphal, 'The Ostrich and the Boogeyman: Placing Postmodernism', *Christian Scholars Review* 20/2 (December 1990): 115.

⁹ Ted Peters, 'Toward Postmodern Theology', *Dialog* 24 (Summer 1985): 221.

¹⁰ At first, the Enlightenment project appeared as the friend of religion, offering to place belief on the more sure footing of human reason. Later thinkers, however, no longer accepted the understanding of God and the world salvaged earlier. This new scepticism led to the atheistic-materialistic world view of late modernity. Specifically, the ideas of Descartes and Newton undergirded a dichotomy between body and soul and posited an absolute gulf between the human soul and the rest of creation. Late moderns found it difficult to conceive of God's action in this dualistic world (*deus ex machina*). As the problem of interaction between body and soul led to the conclusion that the mind is an epiphenomenon, a by-product of the brain, thinkers also eliminated the human soul, viewing it as the unsubstantiated 'ghost in the machine'. See, David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in the Postmodern World: Essays in Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 21–23, 54–56.

the Enterprise. According to the creators of 'Star Trek', in the end our problems are rational, and therefore they require rational expertise.

Postmodernism represents a rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built.

2. The postmodern mind

Modernity has been under attack since Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) lobbed the first volley in the late nineteenth century. But the fullscale frontal assault did not begin until the 1970s. The immediate impulse for the dismantling of the Enlightenment project came from the rise of deconstruction as a literary theory, which influenced a new movement in philosophy.

Deconstruction arose in response to a theory in literature called 'structuralism'. Structuralists theorized [p. 326](#) that cultures develop literary documents—texts—in an attempt to provide structures of meaning by means of which people can make sense out of the meaninglessness of their experience. Literature, therefore, provides categories whereby we can organize and understand our experience of reality. Further, all societies and cultures possess a common, invariant structure.¹¹

The deconstructionists (or post-structuralists) rejected the tenets of structuralism. Meaning is not inherent in a text itself, they argued, but emerges only as the interpreter enters into dialogue with the text.¹² Consequently, the meaning of a text is dependent on the perspective of the one who enters into dialogue with it, so that there are as many interpretations of a text as readers (or readings).

Postmodern philosophers applied the theories of the literary deconstructionists to the world as a whole. Just as the meaning of a text is dependent on the reader, so also reality can be 'read' differently depending on the perspectives of the knowing selves that encounter it. This means that there is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent centre to reality as a whole.

On the basis of ideas such as these, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida called for the destruction of 'onto-theology' (the attempt to set forth ontological descriptions of reality) as well as the 'metaphysics of presence' (the idea that a transcendent something is present in reality).¹³ Because nothing transcendent inheres in reality, all that emerges in the knowing process is the perspective of the self who interprets reality.

Michael Foucault added a moral twist to Derrida's call. Every interpretation is put forward by those in power, he theorized. Because 'knowledge' is always the result of the use of power,¹⁴ to name something is to exercise power and hence to do violence to what is named. And social institutions do violence by imposing their own understanding on the centreless flux of experience. Thus, in contrast to Bacon who sought knowledge in order to gain power over nature, Foucault claimed that every assertion of knowledge is an act of power.

¹¹ 'Structuralism', W. L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980), 553.

¹² . This proposal is often credited to Gadamer. See, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, English translation (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 261.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976), 50.

¹⁴ Michael Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 133.

Richard Rorty, in turn, jettisoned the classic conception of truth as either the mind of language mirroring nature. Truth is established neither by the correspondence of an assertion with objective reality or by the internal coherence of the assertions themselves. Rorty argued that we should simply disband the search for truth and be content with interpretation. Hence, he proposed to replace classic 'systematic philosophy' with 'edifying philosophy' which 'aims at continuing a conversation p. 327 rather than at discovering truth'.¹⁵

The works of Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty reflect what seems to have become the central dictum of postmodern philosophy: 'All is difference.' This view sweeps away the 'uni' of the 'universe' sought by the Enlightenment project, the quest for a unified grasp of objective reality. The world has no centre, only differing viewpoints and perspectives. In fact, even the concept of 'world' presupposes an objective unity or a coherent whole that does not exist 'out there'. In the end, the postmodern world is merely an arena of duelling texts.

Although philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and Rorty have been influential on university campuses, they are only a part of a larger shift in thinking reflected in Western culture. What unifies the otherwise diverse strands of postmodernism is questioning of the central assumptions of the Enlightenment epistemology.

In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism. It is simply not the case that 'each and every clay in each and every way we are getting better and better'. For the first time in many years, members of the emerging generation do not share the conviction of their parents that we will solve the enormous problems of the planet or that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They know that life on the earth is fragile, and the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude which replaces the image of conquest with cooperation.

The new emphasis on holism is related to the postmodern rejection of the second Enlightenment assumption, namely, that truth is certain and hence purely rational. The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellectual as the arbiter of truth. Because truth is non-rational there are other ways of knowing, including through the emotions and the intuition.

Finally, the postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, because the postmodern model of the world does not see the universe as mechanistic and dualistic, but historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is 'out there', waiting to be discovered and known. Instead it is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.

In rejecting the modern assumption of the objectivity of knowledge, the postmodern mind likewise dismisses the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower. Knowledge is not eternal and culturally neutral. Nor is it waiting to be discovered by scientists who bring their rational talents to the givenness of the world. Rather, knowledge is historically and culturally implicated, and consequently, our knowledge is always incomplete. p. 328

The postmodern worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. Not only the specific truths we accept, but even our understanding of truth are a function of the community in which we participate. This, in turn, leads to a new conception of the relativity of truth. Not only is there no absolute truth, more significantly, truth is

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1979), 393.

relative to the community in which we participate. With this in view, the postmodern thinker has given up the Enlightenment quest for the one, universal, supracultural, timeless truth. In its place, truth is what fits within a specific community; truth consists in the ground-rules that facilitate the well-being of the community in which one participates.

The postmodern perspective is reflected in the second 'Star Trek' series, 'The Next Generation'. The humans who make up the crew of the original Enterprise are now joined by humanoid life forms from other parts of the universe. This change represents the broader universality of postmodernity. Humankind is no longer the only advanced intelligence, for evolution has been operative throughout the cosmos. More importantly, the understanding of the quest for knowledge has changed. Humankind is not capable of completing the mandate alone; nor does the burden of the quest fall to humans alone. Hence, the crew of the Enterprise symbolizes the 'new ecology' of humankind in partnership with the universe. Their mission is no longer 'to boldly go where no man has gone before', but 'where no *one* has gone before'.

In 'The Next Generation', Data replaces Spock. In a sense, Data is Spock, the fully rational thinker capable of superhuman intellectual feats. Despite his seemingly perfect intellect, rather than being the transcendent human ideal Spock embodies, he is an android—a subhuman machine. His desire is not only to understand what it means to be human, but also to become human. However, he lacks certain necessary aspects of humanness, including a sense of humour, emotion, and the ability to dream (at least until he learns that his maker programmed dreaming into his circuitry).

Although Data often provides valuable assistance in dealing with problems, he is only one of several who contribute to finding solutions. In addition to the master of rationality, the Enterprise crew includes persons skilled in the affective and intuitive dimensions of human life. Especially prominent is Counsellor Troi, a woman gifted with the ability to perceive the hidden feelings of others.¹⁶

The new voyages of the Enterprise lead its variegated crew into a postmodern universe. In this new world, time is no longer simply linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted.

In contrast to the older series which in typical modern fashion generally ignores questions of God and religious belief, the postmodern world of 'The Next Generation' also includes the supernatural, embodied in the strange character 'Q'. Yet its picture of the divine is not simply p. 329 that of traditional Christian theology. Although possessing the classical attributes of divine power (such as omniscience), the godlike being 'Q' is morally ambiguous, displaying both benevolence and a bent toward cynicism and self-gratification.

II. POSTMODERNITY AND EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

As George Marsden correctly concludes, in some sense evangelicalism—with its focus on scientific thinking, the empirical approach, and common sense—is a child of early modernity.¹⁷ The emerging generation, however, has been nurtured in a context shaped less by commitment to the Enlightenment project embodied in 'Star Trek' than by the postmodern vision of Rorty and 'Star Trek: The Next Generation'. Consequently, the transition from the modern to the postmodern era poses a grave challenge to the Church

¹⁶ Women are not stereotyped into affective roles, however, for the ship's medical doctor is also a woman.

¹⁷ George M. Marsden, 'Evangelical, History and Modernity', in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 98.

in its mission to the next generation and to evangelical theologians, whose task is to decipher the implications of postmodernism for the gospel.

1. Evangelicalism and the postmodern critique of modernity

Evangelicals facing the postmodern context will likely recoil from certain theories proposed by Derrida and Rorty. Their rejection of the Enlightenment project goes too far, for it leads to a scepticism that seems to undermine the Christian conception of truth. Having assumed that reality is not a unified whole, these philosophers have given up the quest for a universal, ultimate truth, leaving us only with our conflicting interpretations. And in the absence of any absolute criterion, all human interpretations are equally valid because all are equally invalid (in fact, as adjectives describing interpretations, 'valid' and 'invalid' become meaningless terms). At best these interpretations can be judged only according to pragmatic standards. Postmodern scepticism leaves us in a world characterized by a never-ending struggle among competing interpretations, reminiscent of Hobbes's war of all against all.

Evangelical theology cannot acquiesce in the radical scepticism of postmodernism. In contrast to the postmodern philosophers, we believe that there is a unifying centre to reality and that this centre has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth. Until the eschaton we may witness the struggle among conflicting interpretations of reality. But although all interpretations are in some sense invalid, they are not all equally invalid. On the basis of the Incarnation, evangelicals assert that conflicting interpretations can be evaluated according to a criterion which in some sense transcends them all and that the Christian worldview is superior to all other claimants.

As necessary as it is, however, we dare not allow our cautious stance toward the radical scepticism of Derrida and Rorty to blind us to the significance of the broader postmodern phenomenon. On the contrary, we ought to find ourselves in fundamental agreement with the [p. 330](#) postmodern critique of the modern mind¹⁸ and its underlying Enlightenment epistemology.

Postmodernism questions the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is certain, and that the criterion for certainty rests with our human rational capabilities. In a similar manner, many evangelicals have continually argued that the rational, scientific method is not the sole measure of truth, for aspects of truth lie beyond reason and cannot be fathomed by reason. As Pascal declared 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of' (*Pensées*, iv, 277).

Similarly, evangelicals can commend the postmodern questioning of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is objective and hence dispassionate. We simply cannot stand outside the historical process or gain universal, culturally neutral knowledge as unconditioned specialists, for we are conditioned participants in our historical and cultural context. Postmodern epistemologists seem to echo Augustine when they assert that our personal convictions and commitments not only colour our search for knowledge, they also facilitate the process of understanding.

Likewise, evangelicals can applaud the postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment assumption that knowledge is inherently good. Events of the twentieth century bear poignant witness that the knowledge explosion cannot guarantee utopia, for technological advances bring not only the possibility of good but also the potential for evil. Evangelicals understand the theological reality that necessitates this critique: the human problem is not merely ignorance, but also a misdirected will.

¹⁸ Several evangelicals have recently expressed sympathy for postmodernism. See, for example, Jonathan Ingleby, 'Two Cheers for Postmodernism', *Third Way* 15/4 (May 1992): 25.

2. Contours of a postmodern evangelical theology

The ongoing mandate of the Church means that we are called to proclaim the gospel to the next generation and to live out the gospel in the midst of a culture that is increasingly postmodern in its thinking. This mandate challenges evangelical theologians to assist the Church by exploring how we can embody the gospel in the categories of our emerging social context. The postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment epistemology suggests several contours that ought to shape a future evangelical theology.

First, a postmodern evangelical theology must be 'post-individual'.

One of the great gains of modernity has been the elevation of the individual. Consequently, our theology dare not lose the importance of the individual human person, indicative of modernity. We must always keep in view the biblical focus on the God who is concerned about each person, the individual as personally responsible to God, and a salvation message that is directed to every human being. The lessons of totalitarianism remind us that we must continually stand against the tyranny of the collective in all its various forms.

While maintaining the individual focus of the Bible, however, we [p. 331](#) must shake ourselves loose of the radical individualism that characterizes the modern mindset. We must affirm with postmodernism that knowledge—including knowledge of God—is not merely objective, not simply discovered by the neutral knowing self.

Here we can learn from contemporary communitarian scholars who have joined the postmodern assault on the modern epistemological fortress. In place of the modern paradigm with its focus on the self-reflective, autonomous subject and the modern ideal of the self-determining self who exists outside any tradition or community, they offer a constructive alternative: the individual within community.

Community is integral to the process of knowing, communitarians argue, for crucial to the knowing process is a cognitive framework mediated to the individual by the community in which he or she participates. Similarly, the community of participation is crucial to identity formation. A sense of personal identity develops through the telling of a personal narrative¹⁹ which is always embedded in the story of the communities in which we participate.²⁰ The community mediates to its members a transcending story which includes traditions of virtue, common good, and ultimate meaning.²¹ Rather than requiring a neutral, objective stance, therefore, knowing occurs within a community and the position of personal commitment that presence in a community entails.

Evangelical theologians must take seriously the discoveries of contemporary communitarians,²² in so far as they are in a sense echoing a great biblical theme, namely, that the goal of God's programme is the establishment of community in the highest sense. Instead of elevating the individual to the centre, therefore, postmodern evangelicals must carve out a theology that integrates the human person into community, acknowledging as well the importance of the believing community and our presence within it for our

¹⁹ Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 81.

²⁰ See, for example, Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 221.

²¹ E.g., George A. Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church', *Christian Century* 107/16 (May 9, 1990): 495.

²² See, for example, Daniel A. Helminiak, 'Human Solidarity and Collective Union in Christ', *Anglican Theological Review* 70/1 (January 1988): 37.

knowledge of God. In short, in our theologizing we must take seriously the reality of community as the context in which the individual is necessarily embedded.

In addition to being post-individual, a postmodern evangelical theology must be post-rational.

Another significant gain of the Enlightenment has been the elevation of reason. Consequently, a postmodern evangelical theology dare not become anti-intellectual. Yet it must embody the biblical understanding that the cognitive dimension does not exhaust either the human person, reality as a whole, or [p. 332](#) the truth of God. Nor can we continue to collapse truth into the categories of rational certainty that typify modernity. Rather, our theology must give place to the concept of 'mystery'—not as an irrational aspect alongside the rational, but as a reminder of the fundamentally non-rational or supra-rational reality of God. This means that while remaining reasonable, our theology must jettison the unwarranted rationalistic bent of all modern theologies.

Central to this task is the rethinking of the function of theological propositions. We must continue to acknowledge the fundamental importance of rational discourse, of course, and hence of propositions. Yet, our theology cannot remain fixated on the propositionalist approach of the older evangelical theologies, which viewed Christian truth simply as correct doctrine.

In their attempt to replace the individualistic foundational rationalism of modern Western thinking with an understanding of knowledge and belief that views them as socially and linguistically constituted,²³ postmodern social theorists provide helpful assistance in understanding the role of propositions. At the heart of being a Christian is a personal encounter with God in Christ which shapes and moulds us and which unites us with the community of believers. On the basis of this encounter, we seek to bring into an understandable whole the diverse strands of our personal lives and the incorporation of our lives in that of the faith community by appeal to categories such as 'sin' and 'grace', 'alienation' and 'reconciliation', 'helplessness' and 'divine power', 'having been lost' but 'now being saved'. It is in this context of making sense out of life by means of recounting the story of a transformative religious experience that theological propositions find their importance. No experience occurs in a vacuum; no transformation comes to us apart from an interpretation facilitated by the concepts—the 'web of belief'—we bring to it. On the contrary, experience and interpretive concepts are reciprocally related. Our concepts facilitate the experiences we have in life; at the same time, our experience determines the interpretive concepts we employ to speak about our lives.

So also the encounter with God in Christ is both facilitated by, and expresses itself in theological categories which are propositional in nature. These categories which form the cradle for this experience, in turn, constitute the grid by means of which we now view all of life.

A post-rational evangelical theology will be 'holistic'. The Enlightenment project was built on the division of reality into the dualism of mind and matter, which was expressed anthropologically through the distinction between soul and body. Evangelicals imbued with the Enlightenment outlook are concerned about saving souls, with at best a secondary concern for bodies which, however, has no eternal theological importance. If we would minister in the postmodern world, we must realize that the human person is a unified whole, and the gospel must exercise an impact on [p. 333](#) humans in their entirety. This does not mean merely giving greater place to human emotion or the affective aspects of life alongside the rational, but integrating the emotional-affective, as well as the bodily-

²³ This opinion was recently articulated by Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community', 495.

sensual, with the intellectual-rational within the one human person. In other words, we must be willing to acknowledge the ‘Counsellor Troi’ in each of us.

But postmodern evangelical holism must go beyond putting together the soul and body torn asunder in the Enlightenment. In a post-individualist theology, the human person will also be put back into the social and environmental context which forms and nourishes us. We must not merely speak of the human person in isolation, but also as the person-in-relationships. Our anthropology must take seriously that our identity includes being in relationship to nature, in relationship with God, and, in this manner, in relationship with ourselves.

Finally, a postmodern evangelical theology must be focused on spirituality.

A final gain of the Enlightenment was the quest for knowledge, which was viewed as good. Indeed, knowledge is a good, and hence evangelical theory is concerned to discover the truth of God. Consequently, the goal of theologizing includes right thinking, acknowledging that right beliefs or correct doctrine are important. However, our goal can never merely be the amassing of a wealth of knowledge for its own sake. Nor should we be under any illusion that the possession of knowledge—even theological knowledge—is inherently good ([1 Cor. 8:1](#)). Knowledge is good only when it facilitates a good result, specifically, when it fosters spirituality in the knower.

A theology that is ‘focused on spirituality’, therefore, views itself as immensely practical. In the postmodern world we must reappropriate the older pietist discovery that a ‘right heart’ takes primacy over a ‘right head’. Theology must take its lodging in the heart, for it is concerned with the transformation of not only the intellectual commitments, but also the character and the life of the believer (as well as of the faith community).

To this end, a theology that is ‘focused on spirituality’ fosters a proper ordering of activism and quietism. No longer can we follow the modern outlook which looks to overt activity, conduct, or specific decisions as the sole measure of spirituality. Rather, the postmodern world correctly understands that activism must be born from inner resource. Theology, in turn, contributes to this inner resource, for it seeks to clarify the foundational belief structure which shapes our responses to the situations of life and which structure is reflected in the acts we choose to do.

CONCLUSION

Our society is in the throes of a monumental transition, the movement from modernity to postmodernity. The emerging generation—those who were raised on ‘Star Trek: The Next Generation’—is already imbued with many aspects of the postmodern mind. Confronted by this new context, we dare not fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a [P. 334](#) return to the modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth—indeed, we simply cannot turn back the clock—for we are not called to minister in the past, but in the contemporary context, influenced as it is by postmodern ideas.

Postmodernism does pose dangers. Nevertheless, it would be ironic and tragic if evangelicals ended up being the last defenders of the now dying modernity. Rather, imbued with the vision of God’s programme for his world, we must claim the new postmodern context for Christ by embodying the Christian faith in ways that the new generation can understand. In short, under the banner of the cross, we must ‘boldly go where no one has gone before’.