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Editorial

We are living in the midst of a literary, ideological and theological revolution which some predict will be as important as the Copernican revolution of the Middle Ages. The flood of literature on modernity and post- modernity, on secular and religious pluralism, and on religious fundamentalism and New Age movements is overwhelming. Most of us are left confused, yet we dare not ignore these challenges or overreact to them. To do so spells death for evangelicalism and to the cause of world evangelization. From the perspective of faith in Christ and his gospel we are being called to critique and respond to the claims of the neo- paganism and religious inclusiveness of our age.

This issue of ERT is devoted to exploring these challenges to biblical faith and to developing a coherent theology that holds together the transcendent gospel and the cultural reality from below. We are called to a passionate engagement with the spirit of modernity and post- modernity in the world and in the Church, rejecting what is alien to the gospel and transforming what is open, to the glory of God. We are commissioned to build churches as communities of faith offering life which is eternal to all who are seeking a reality which is liberating from suffering, oppression and despair. The symbolism of the Celtic Cross points the way forward.

Mapping Evangelical Theology in a Post-modern World[1]

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

This article, given as part of a lecture series at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, is the best analysis I have read of how evangelicals should respond to post-modernity. It is a lucid account of the role of biblical authority and literal meaning in interpreting the Good News in our pluralistic society and modelling it in 'communities of faith'. The author has a passion for a Christocentric faith, tolerance of others, a humble culture-critical spirit and a commitment to joyously practising the truth. A stronger trinitarian emphasis on God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit would have enhanced our task of theological map-reading. Editor

I INTRODUCTION: MAPPING, MISSION, AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

My choice of topic has been influenced by my recent sojourn among the Scots, a race of intrepid explorers. I find particularly inspiring the example of David Livingstone, the

[1] A revised version of my first and third Kantzer Lectures, delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on November 15–16, 1994, on the topic 'Mapping the Way: Biblical Authority and Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern World'.

Scottish map-making missionary- explorer, whose great vision was to make a coast-to-coast trek through Africa that would open up the continent to Christianity.[2]

Africa, indeed the whole planet, has now been meticulously mapped, at least in its physical characteristics. Yet the world's intellectual and cultural contours are rapidly changing. We are approaching the end not only of the twentieth century, but of the modern era. We are in a state of flux; the old maps may no longer be adequate as the church navigates her way into the next millennium. For two centuries now, the church has been *reacting* to modernity. Can we be more *pro-active* when confronted with post-modernity? Livingstone's 'missionary-explorer' is an appropriate paradigm for the theologian trying to navigate a vast uncharted continent: 'postmodernity'.

How shall we 'plot' evangelicalism's position with regard to the modern and postmodern worlds? In what follows, I shall indicate what course I think evangelicals should set, and what provisions they should take. The theologian, as missionary-explorer, is first and foremost a biblical interpreter. For we must interpret both the world and the Word, and we must put our interpretations into practice. *Theology is about reading and following biblical maps into new worlds.*

II TWO FRENCH REVOLUTIONS: FROM DESCARTES TO DERRIDA

A massive intellectual revolution is taking place 'that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages'.[3] Whatever else it is, it is 'the quest to move beyond modernism'.[4] But what is, or was, modernity? Two French revolutions—those associated with the names of Descartes and Derrida—may serve as important intellectual landmarks. Each of these revolutions has proven to be 'Copernican' in its effect. Just as Copernicus changed the way we think about ourselves when he suggested that the earth turned round the sun rather than vice versa, so Descartes and Derrida have changed the way we think about our knowledge of the world, and ourselves as knowers. Whereas Copernicus 'decentered' the earth, Descartes decentered God and divine revelation by making the knowing subject and Reason to be the source of truth. Derrida then decentered the knowing subject and reason by arguing that language and rhetoric are more fundamental.

When Descartes sat down at his desk in 1619, he decided 'to embark upon a skeptical voyage of doubting everything'. He promised to leave the homeland behind, 'to chart a new path, and to light upon new lands'.[5] Descartes's itinerary was the depths of his own subjectivity; his goal, clear ideas and certain knowledge. His was no idle quest, but one that sought to lead a war-torn Europe beyond the rough seas of religious conflict to the cool, calm waters of rationality. With his discovery of a universal method for arriving at clarity and certainty, Descartes fathered modernity. What Descartes discovered was

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[2] Livingstone was particularly intrigued by Africa's waterways: he was convinced that the Zambesi was 'God's highway into the interior' (A. J. Nevins, 'Livingstone, David', *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission* [ed. S. Neill, et al.; London: Lutterworth, 1971] p. 354).

[3] D. Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), p. 2.

[4] S. J. Grenz, 'Postmodernism and the Future of Evangelical Theology: Star Trek and the Next Generation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994), p. 323.

[5] D. R. Stiver, 'Much Ado About Athens and Jerusalem. The Implications of Postmodernism for Faith', *RevExp* 91 (1994), p. 83.

thought.[6] The Cartesian *cogito*—the 'I think'—is the first truth that doubt could not deny. Descartes believed he could 'peel off' everything—his previous beliefs, his body, his place in history—and find, in the end, that he is essentially a thinking subject. Modern philosophy is the story of the turn to the subject, to the 'I think'.

Descartes' rational subject is like an omniscient narrator. The stories it tells, in so far as they are rational, are always true. Modernity's goal was a unified explanation, a grand theory that would find a rational place for everything and put everything in its rational place. This universal explanatory scheme is a 'metanarrative', a great story that explains all other stories, and formulates a metaphysics, a theory of reality. Most 'isms' (e.g., Platonism, rationalism, Marxism, etc.) are metanarratives. 'Modernity' names that project in which the mind tries to master the world with a rational map that purports to see the world from a 'God's eye point of view'.

If the first French Revolution enshrined the goddess of Reason, the second French revolution may be said to have stormed modernity's cathedral and cast out the goddess. If we must date the birth of the postmodern era, I suggest 1968. This was the year not only of social unrest but also one that marked Derrida's arrival on the intellectual scene.[7] Even Derrida's critics acknowledge that his works written in the late 1960s 'are among the most crucial documents of our period'.[8]

How shall I compare Descartes and Derrida? Derrida is the stowaway on Descartes's voyage to certainty, a hermeneutic hit man. Whereas Descartes believed he had landed and struck bedrock—his own consciousness—Derrida doubts even that.[9] Derrida doubts Reason's ability to achieve a'totalizing' discourse, that is, a universal explanation of some aspect of reality. Derrida is an Undoer, a de-constructor; and what he undoes is the covenant between language and reality which characterizes western philosophy's belief that it can state the truth. Derrida basically wants to undo 'logocentrism', the belief that language can be used to map the world, the belief that consciousness can mirror the cosmos.

Derrida, much like Marx and Freud, claims that consciousness is not so pure: it is rather rooted in a body and a particular socio-political context, and influenced by its language, culture, and time. The soul is not its own ground; we should rather say that the soul is 'soiled'—a result of its being rooted or 'earthed'. The 'I think' is not the foundation Descartes believed it to be. Postmodern thinkers argue that we have no non-linguistic knowledge, even of our own experiences. Language is less the expression than the *environment* of our thinking. Subjectivity is not prior to but rather a function of language.

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[6] 'Thought; this alone is inseparable from me. . . . I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks' (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 22, p. 15).

[7] Actually, Derrida made his academic debut in 1966 at a seminar at John's Hopkins University. For a more thorough presentation of Derrida's works, see my *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), chaps. 2–4.

[8] N. A. Scott, Jr., 'The New Trahison des Clercs: Reflections on the Present Crisis in Humanistic Studies', *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 62 (1986), p. 412.

[9] Modernity has always had its critics, those unbelievers who refused to accept Descartes's story of the objective knowing subject. Karl Marx undid the privileged place of the individual by suggesting that the individual was the product of the collective. Freud undid the privilege of consciousness by discovering, in his psychoanalytic voyages, the submerged lost continent of Atlantis, the Unconscious. Nietzsche questioned the products of the mind, stating that our truth claims were really rhetorical strategies that hid our will to power. Similarly, Feuerbach questioned theology, arguing that our doctrines were really projections of human desires, and that God was simply man's best thought about himself. The secret of theology, said Feuerbach, is anthropology. Despite these counter-attacks, however, modernity rolled on.

For the postmodernist, language is, first and foremost, an instrument of ideology and power. Language shapes our perception of reality. The very contents of our minds are not really our own, but rather reflections of the culture we live in. The language we inhabit shapes our innermost thoughts. We can never step outside our language. This despair of language explains why irony has become the privileged mode of postmodern-speak. Irony is a way of saying something that you do not really mean. Irony is therefore the most honest form of speech, since it acknowledges its own artificial nature. The current widespread suspicion of language should give would-be ministers of the Word considerable pause. How can the church represent its 'old, old story' as a truth claim if all metanarratives are merely masks for domination?

According to David Tracy, 'Postmodern thought at its best is an ethics of resistance—resistance, above all, to more of the same.'[10] Postmodernists resist the temptation to think that they speak either with the voice of God or with the voice of reason. What Derrida finally resists is the imperial 'we', as in 'we hold these truths to be self-evident'. This resistance to the imperial 'we' is allied to the postmodern resistance to metanarratives. In its distrust of stories that purport to speak for everyone, postmodernity marks the return of narrative. We may have no overviews, but we still have *views*, views from where we, that is, from where *some* of us, are. In place of comprehensive theories about everything, we have confessions about how things look to us. The return to narrative may herald a new age of discovery, where individuals and communities set out, not on universal voyages of reason, but on pilgrimages of particularity.

How *can* Christians do justice to the various particularities and still make the claim that Jesus is the truth—a claim that is true not just for the Christian community, but for everyone? Biblical criticism—including the vaunted historical-critical approach—is today considered just as ideological as any other approach to Scripture. No reading is innocent, or objective, in the postmodern world; rather, all reading is influenced by social power. With this thought we come to a vital question: is the undoing of the modern knowing subject a new obstacle, or a new opportunity, for the church?

Is postmodernity simply one more chapter in the history of western thought, or does it represent the end of the story of philosophy? The prefix 'post-' is the vital clue. It signifies passage, what comes after. We are indeed living in revolutionary times. To talk about the lay of the contemporary land is to talk about shifting ground and upheaval. Modernity and postmodernity are like two great tectonic plates whose movements and collision uproot and overturn the foundations of earthly institutions: states, universities, churches. Are these violent waves rocking western civilization the quake itself, or only the first tremors? On the one hand, the institutions of modernity—the secular city, liberal democracy, capitalism—are still with us. On the other hand, the ideologies of modernity—Cartesian rationalism, Marxism, theological liberalism—have largely disappeared. The break-up of modernity, like all totalitarian systems, creates both great opportunities and grave risks. Such is the situation at the end of the Cold War between evangelicalism and the modern world.

The best definition of 'postmodern' of which I am aware is 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.[11] Translated, this means: distrust any voice that purports to tell you that 'that's the way it is'. We can fill out this definition of 'postmodern' with a number of contrasts: whereas the modern searches for global metanarratives, the postmodern emphasizes local narratives. Where the modern seeks purpose, design, and hierarchy in

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[10] D. Tracy, 'Many Faces of Modernity', *Theology Today* 51 (1993), p. 108.

[11] F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the natural and social worlds, the postmodern expects the rule of chance, desire, and anarchy. Whereas the modern believes in transcendence—of the knowing subject, of reason—the postmodern stresses immanence. Theologically, modernity appears as a substitute for God the Father—with Reason playing the role of transcendent authority—and postmodernity for the Holy Spirit—the more diffuse, horizontal, and non-hierarchical presence of the divine in the world.[12]

Descartes discovered a land that did not really exist. The 'I think' is never disembodied, never dislocated, never disinterested, but rather embodied, located, interested. Descartes's 'logos'—the voice of reason—is incarnate too. It never attains a perspective outside history, culture, and our bodily condition. Instead of metanarratives, then, we have narratives. Do postmodernists continue to distinguish right from wrong, true from false? Yes they do; most of them are not 'silly relativists'. However, the standards which they use are no longer universal; they are rather embedded in particular languages, cultures, and practices. 'Truth' has become what a community most values. Knowledge and truth alike are always perspectival and provisional, and always incomplete. Truth is community based—no longer universal, but tribal.

III INVENTION OR DISCOVERY? THE CRISIS OF TRUTH AND RATIONALITY

The sixteenth-century was aptly named the 'Age of Discovery'. The modern mind was just beginning to awaken to its intellectual powers, and to its missionary-explorer task. In the twentieth century, however, the emphasis has moved from discovering to constructing. Postmodernists are busy deconstructing modernity's maps. Maps are expressions of will to power that tell us more about the map-maker than about reality. Why else, for instance, would medieval cartographers have put Jerusalem at the centre of the world? Map-making—an expression of the will-to-rational-discovery—has thus fallen into disrepute. Today, map-making is merely another kind of fiction that invites demythologizing.

What alternatives do evangelical theologians have, poised as they are between two worlds? One could choose, with certain fundamentalist theologians, to be *repeaters* and simply parrot the biblical text and the Christian tradition. Or one could choose, with many modern liberal theologians, to become *revisers* of text and tradition. Or again, one could, with certain radical postmodernists, become *revilers* of text and tradition, and claim that they serve only ideological interests.[13]

Where should we locate evangelical theology with regard to modernity and postmodernity? The identity and direction of evangelicalism has been the subject of a number of recent books—a sure sign of drift![14] Is modernity a thorn in evangelicalism's faith that we are glad to be well rid of? It is not so simple to say. On the one hand, evangelical theology, with its focus on scientific thinking, empiricism, and common sense,

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[12] As I. Hassan has suggested in the Postface to his *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Towards a Postmodern Literature* (2d. ed.; Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

[13] There is a fourth option, the 'renewers', that some associate with postliberal or the 'new Yale' theology. This view wants to renew confessional traditions and to resist having to correlate theology with the contemporary context. They are especially suspicious of organic world views and religious pluralism as ideologies that deny the integrity of their particular traditions.

[14] See, *inter alia*, D. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); R. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); S. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

is a child of early modernity.[15] On the other hand, modernity is what evangelicalism was supposedly *against*. The solution, I believe, is to clarify the role of reason in evangelical thought.

For the past forty or so years, evangelicals have been busy trying to defend the faith against modernity, largely with the tools of modernity. In exegesis, theology, and apologetics alike, many evangelicals accepted a Cartesian view of rationality, at least to the extent that they sought absolute foundations and certain conclusions. In this respect, evangelicals and liberals fought on common ground with similar weapons. Evangelicals like Charles Hodge accepted the modern idea that theology, if it is to be credible, must imitate the natural sciences. Hodge likened theology to an inductive science where the mind conforms to biblical data.[16] To the postmodernist, however, all attempts to parade reasons for one's faith are immediately suspect. People are more ready to acknowledge that all thinkers have convictions and commitments with which they begin.[17] According to Stanley Grenz, evangelical theologians 'ought to find [them]selves in fundamental agreement with the postmodern critique of the modern mind and its underlying Enlightenment epistemology'.[18]

I am not for a moment suggesting that we abandon our commitment to rationality. Evangelicalism can only lose ground by abandoning biblical literacy and critical thinking. What I am suggesting is that there are other models of rationality than the Cartesian or foundationalist one that considers beliefs justified and rational only if they rest on sufficient evidence.[19] In my view, reason plays not a magisterial but a ministerial role. Beliefs, like persons, should be presumed innocent. Reason cannot rule them out of court simply because they do not live up to modern standards of evidence. Being rational is no guarantee of having an absolute foundation for knowledge; it is rather the admission that one's beliefs are fallible and thus need to be subjected to critical tests.[20]

We stand between two worlds, faced with a choice, a choice for truth, or for truths. Our situation is not unlike that of Elijah and the Israelites on Mount Carmel:

> The Northern Kingdom was going nowhere; it showed no awareness of a national destiny. Indeed, the eventual intrusion of Baalism suggests that Israel had very little sense of self-

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[15] G. Marsden, 'Evangelical, History and Modernity', in *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (ed. G. M. Marsden; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 98.

[16] See especially C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol. 1, chap. 1, 'On Method'.

[17] 'In a way that has never been possible in modernity, one can find philosophical or rational space for "giving an account for the hope that is in you" ' (Stiver, 'Athens and Jerusalem', 94).

[18] Grenz, 'Star Trek', pp. 329–30. Some evangelicals were there already: C. Van Til, for instance, followed A. Kuyper in pointing out the presuppositional, committed, and ultimately religious nature of all thinking.

[19] The philosopher J. Habermas speaks of modernity as an 'incomplete project'. He agrees that modernity erred in making reason subject-centred, but he argues that reason can be relocated. Rationality is rather a feature of intersubjective communication, a matter of coming to agreements not by rhetoric or by coercion, but by validating what one says. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff have offered alternative, non-foundationalist epistemologies, based on a retrieval of the philosophy of T. Reid. See K. Clark, *Return to Reason: A Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and Defense of Reason and Belief in God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Critique of Enlightenment Evidentialism and Defense of Reason and Belief in God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

[20] See my 'Christ and Concept: Doing Theology and the "Ministry" of Philosophy', in *Doing Theology in Today's World* (ed. J. D. Woodbridge and T. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 99–146.

identity or covenantal calling. Apart from the external religious accouterments that lay on every side, this people's public life had become essentially secular.[21]

The most important similarity is that we, like ancient Israel, are in danger of becoming *indifferent* to religious truth. It is wearying to cut against the cultural grain. Conciliation rather than confrontation is the watchword of the day. With Ahab, our instinct is to call those who raise the question of truth 'troublers of Israel'. It may well be politically incorrect to ask about truth, but it would be theologically incorrect (and ethically irresponsible) not to do so.

A second parallel between our times and Elijah's is religious *pluralism*. The radical pluralist does not simply tolerate or respect different religious options, but considers them equally valid. Elijah begs to differ: easy compromise is incompatible with God's command to have 'no other gods'. 'How long will you waver between two opinions?' asks Elijah. Of course we must give up our prejudices. But are all our convictions about truth merely prejudices? And is truth only a matter of a sincere conscience? ' "If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him". But the people said nothing' (1 Kgs. 18:21).

The church in every generation must face difficult questions about truth, and it must do so with passion, not with despair. Why should the church bother about truth? In order to avoid living a lie. The command to avoid idolatry is essentially a command to respect, rather than repress, reality. For idolatry is the worship or service of that which is not God. The second commandment (Exod. 20:4) condemning idolatry was unique in the world of its day, and it follows from the first, 'You shall have no other gods before me'. Virtually the whole history of Israel's religion can be told as the struggle between true religion and idolatry.

The idols which today threaten the church are not made of wood or stone, but of images: 'Little children, guard against ideologies'. We can idolize wealth, nation, even religion. Paul Tillich reminds us that: 'Every church should be suspicious of itself, lest it formulate truths only as an expression of its will-to-power.' Fundamentalism and liberalism alike can become ideologies to the extent that human interpretations are elevated over that which they are supposedly about. We must be wary of worshiping human tradition. To this extent, we can appreciate the iconoclasm of deconstruction. Derrida reminds us that there may be idols that need to be cast out even from evangelical shrines.

In a media-driven world where images count more than arguments, people with short attention spans erect, tear down, and seek new idols with frightening speed, because the idol, which is all image and no reality, does not satisfy. What people had previously believed in has let them down. Why bother about truth? Because idols don't deliver: 'O Baal, answer us! . . . but there was no response'.

Augustine long ago made a famous distinction between things to be used and things to be enjoyed. 'To enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake.'[22] For all its talk of desire, play, and pleasure, our culture is not characterized by joy, but rather by despair. And little wonder: Augustine goes on to say that the only object which ought to be enjoyed is the triune God, who is our highest good and true happiness. This goal alone, I suggest, orients theology's explorations and represents the true destination of the Christian life.

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[21] S. J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), pp. xxiv–xxv.

[22] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 1.4.4.

IV BIBLICAL LITERACY: WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN SHOULD KNOW

To minister the Word to the world we need to understand both the world we live in, and the Word we minister. If theology is the process by which the Word of God is brought to bear on the world in an enlightening and liberating manner, then achieving biblical literacy is part and parcel of becoming a competent theologian. My thesis is straightforward: ministers of the Word must be biblically literate.

Postmodernity presents special problems and possibilities for the minister of the Word. Where postmodernity is having an impact on biblical studies is in its insistence that neither the text nor the reader is objective. There is a widespread incredulity towards metanarratives, a disbelief in a God's eye or a universal rational point of view. No reading is innocent; all reading is 'from below'. One of the most important issues for theologians and other ministers of the Word, therefore, is how to read the Bible. The dictionary definition of 'literacy' is 'the ability to read and write'. Literacy refers both to a skill, and to a certain body of background information that a person needs to know in order to follow the text and to function in society. Similarly, biblical literacy is a necessary condition for coherent Christian faith and practice. Biblical interpretation is a matter of following the Word from page to practice. If this is right, then achieving biblical literacy is one of the, if not *the*, single most urgent individual and social tasks of the day. George Lindbeck, a Yale theologian, has observed that biblical illiteracy is a more serious matter than our current ecological or nuclear problems!

Reformations happen when the church recovers biblical authority. Luther's study of the Greek NT enabled him to challenge the previous tradition of biblical interpretation, an appeal to the text that produced tremendous results. Might we be on the verge of a similar recovery, not of biblical language but of biblical literature? Thanks in part to their critique of Reason, postmodern thinkers have rediscovered forms of discourse other than the conceptual. Evangelicals need to seize the day and formulate a view of biblical authority which does justice to *all* the literary forms and aspects of Scripture, and not only the conceptual. Reading verses as isolated propositions is a modern habit, a holdover from a now discredited positivism.

A literary approach makes two vital contributions to understanding the Bible: first, it encourages us to treat texts as certain kinds of wholes, and to see the literary whole as the most important context for interpreting individual verses. Second, it refuses to separate the content of the Bible from its form. The textual form is the only access we have to the textual content. The literary forms of the Bible are our Christian maps of the world. Without a certain map, certain areas of reality would remain uncharted. Each literary form therefore has a distinctive role to play in the task of bringing persons to and establishing persons in the faith. The biblical texts are concerned not only to teach truth by means of logical propositions, but to display the truth to the whole person with a veritable arsenal of imaginative communicative strategies.

V CHARTING THE WAY TO REALITY

My suggestion is that evangelical theology can capitalize on postmodernity's criticism of modernity's elevation of the conceptual form in order to recover the authority of the other biblical literary forms or 'genres'.[23]

A literary genre is like a map, a map made of words. There are different kinds of maps—maps of roads, of geological characteristics, of historical incidents, of the stars—

[23] 'Genre' derives from the Latin 'genus', meaning 'kind'.

each with its own 'scale', that is, its own peculiar relation to reality. Knowing the scale makes a difference if one is on foot: does an inch equal one mile or one hundred? Establishing a text's genre is perhaps the most important interpretive move one can make. Only when we know what kind of whole we have before us will we be able to understand the individual parts. Many misunderstandings of the Bible stem from a failure to appreciate its genre. When this happens, we make a category mistake; we read a text as if it were one thing when actually it is something quite different.

Consider the Bible, then, as a collection of verbal maps—a 'word' atlas. Christians plot their location in history not by the stars but by means of biblical texts. 'You are here'—living between the times, between the first and second coming of Christ, just as Paul was. The Bible tells us not only where we are, but where we should be. We can locate ourselves on a moral map; we can determine whether we are in or out of God's will. It is vital, when exploring, to have the right kind of map. Neither an historical atlas nor a map of the stars, for instance, will help one navigate through Chicagoland.

One of the tasks of the systematic theologian is to coordinate the various maps with one another. Another task is to coordinate the biblical maps with the way the world actually is today. We need to avoid two extremes: 'Biblicism may fail to see the literary character of Scripture and treat Scripture like a code book of theological ordinances. Criticism may be so preoccupied with the literary aspects of Scripture that it fails to see the substance of which literature happens to be the vehicle.'[24] The Christian church uses its charts rather than those of philosophers, psychotherapists, and so on, to navigate its way. The canon is 'Christography'—a collection of writings that, in various ways, lead to Christ, the wisdom and truth of God. Theology too is Christography: as it addresses various problems in the world, theology takes its bearings from Christ. The Bible is our compass, and Christ is our north, south, east, and west.

Like maps, forms of literature are selective in the features of reality they highlight. What a map represents, and how it represents it, depends on what kind of map it is. Texts do not correspond to reality in a one-to-one fashion. This kind of reductionism serves neither biblical literacy nor theology. Rather, all reference to reality (including pointing with one's finger) is ordered by conventions which are bound to literary forms. One has to understand the literary conventions in order to grasp the nature of the reference to reality.

Two further points of clarification should be made: first, it is important to distinguish what I have said about literary conventions from the view that reality itself is merely a matter of social and literary conventions. That latter view represents postmodernity at its most extreme. Second, do not assume that straightforward history is 'truer' than other types of literature. Such an assumption is a reflex of modernity, with its privileging of the empirical (i.e., what can be sensed). Must one really say that the photograph is truer than the portrait? I do not believe that we must. The portrait may increase our knowledge of a person not by means of mirroring but by deepening or intensifying our awareness of her spiritual rather than physical qualities. Someone has said that the whole Protestant doctrine of man is summed up in Rembrandt's portraits. The same could not be said of my school photographs!

No one form of literature—no one map—exhausts all that can be said about God, humanity, and the world. The Christian who is biblically literate—whose thinking, imagination, language, and life is informed by the biblical texts—will have a faith formed by law, wisdom, song, apocalyptic, prophecy, gospel, and doctrine. These literary forms

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[24] B. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 68.

together make up Christian faith and identity.[25] They shape the way we view the world, the way we view God, the way we view ourselves. If we are contemplating the future, for instance, we must do so following the rules of biblical apocalyptic. We must see the end of history as under divine control. The map of biblical apocalyptic will not permit the humanist's easy belief in the inevitability of human progress. Because of biblical apocalyptic, Christians cannot say things like, 'The human race is getting better and better' or 'If we were only left to ourselves, if we could only get back to nature, everyone would be fine'. Such sentiments go against the grain of biblical literature.

The postmodern world presents both possibilities and problems to those who seek to minister God's Word to the world. Positively, postmodern thinkers have reminded us that there are many voices that deserve to be heard. We must not reduce the many forms of literature in the Bible to the conceptual; not every voice in the Bible is that of the systematic theologian. Negatively, the post-modern 'liberation' of the reader may degenerate into a reign of terror. If we substitute the authority of the reader for that of the text, we cannot help but commit interpretive violence against the text. Those who affirm biblical authority, however, will feel the obligation to listen to the voice of the text instead of forcing their own creative readings upon it.[26]

Theology is a species of biblical cartography, a study of the ways in which the various verbal maps of the Bible refer to, and render, reality. The Bible shows us the way to and the way of life. Jesus reproached the Jews of his day for their biblical illiteracy: 'You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:39–40). Later, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained how the law and the prophets all testify to him (Luke 24:27). The Bible is our guide to Christ. Systematic theology is the process by which the rest of reality is viewed through biblical Christography.

VI 'EVANGELICAL': A BISHOP'S CRITIQUE AND A FLOWER

Being able to understand the charts is one thing—actually following them another. Biblical literacy involves both skills: reading charts and using charts to navigate. For it is one thing to say that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and another thing to follow him. In our biblical word atlas, we have a compass which, if we pay attention to it, will keep us oriented, wherever we are in the world, and whichever world—modern or postmodern—we happen to inhabit. The credibility of evangelical theology ultimately depends not only on sound exegesis, but also on sound practice. Indeed, the way we live, the way we *perform* the text, is part and parcel of evangelical interpretation. In the words of our Lord: 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock' (Matt. 7:24). These are sobering words, for evangelicals are not immune to seduction by the spirit of the age. In thought and life, evangelicals are all too often barely distinguishable from their modern and postmodern neighbours.[27] If I still answer to the label 'evangelical', however, it is because I believe that, at its best, it is a tradition that encourages self-criticism under the banner of *sola*

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[25] 'A particular literary style is not only appropriate to, but generative of, a life style' (W. A. Beardslee, *Literary Criticism of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970], p. 76).

[26] I argue this point in considerable detail in my *Is There a Meaning in this Text?* chap. 7.

[27] M. Noll complains that the scandal of the evangelical mind is its absence. See his The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

gratia and *sola scriptura*, and because it resists the temptation to exchange the gospel of Jesus Christ for another gospel that fits in more easily with contemporary culture.

It was the practice of Thomas Aquinas to begin his discussion of each question in his *Summa Theologica* by stating the three most powerful objections to his own position. In a similar critical spirit, though not pretending to offer a *Summa Theologica Evangelica*, I begin my apology for evangelical theology by considering three objections to it raised by Richard Holloway, the Bishop of Edinburgh.[28]

Holloway notes, first, that evangelical theology often tends towards a sectarian, them/us, mentality. Like other -isms, so evangelicalism may degenerate into an ideology that demands unthinking acceptance. Second, evangelical theology displays a passion for the single explanation. Not only is this too simplistic, but it runs the risk of intellectual pride. Third, it suffers from a poor aesthetics, by which the Bishop means, I think, that it holds a weak doctrine of creation and displays little evidence of creativity.[29] What interests me is that these three criticisms are similar to the ones that postmodernists level against modernity: that it tends to exclusivistic absolutism, to unified explanations, and to demean art as less than rational.

There are many ways, however, to describe phenomena. Bishop Holloway has described some potential weaknesses. I wish to define evangelicalism by what lies at its theological centre, rather than by what one finds on its sociological circumference (one can find any number of sects, incredible ideas, and individuals on the hinterlands of evangelicalism). It might be helpful to have a device with which to focus our thoughts. 'TULIP' is already taken, as a mnemonic for five-point Calvinism. I would therefore like to conscript a new flower into theological service: the humble daisy. A daisy has a yellow centre with white petals that extend like spokes from a hub—an apt analogy, since I wish to define evangelical theology by what lies at the core rather than by what lies at the periphery. Here, then, is my version of five-point evangelicalism:

Divine	initiatives
Amazing	grace
Imputed	righteousness
Scriptural	authority
Yesterday and today	

But this floral summary is only a first approximation.

VII GOOD NEWS: A DEFINITION 'FROM ABOVE'[30]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists as its first entry under 'evangelical' the following definition: 'of or according to the teaching of the gospel'. Karl Barth's definition is similar: ' "Evangelical" means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the

[28] R. Holloway, 'Evangelicalism: An Outsider's Perspective', in Evangelical Anglicans: Their Role and Influence in the Church Today (ed. R. T. France and A. E. McGrath; London: S.P.C.K., 1993), pp. 174–83. The Bishop is referring for the most part to Anglican evangelicalism, but similar objections are often levelled against American varieties of evangelicalism too.

[29] This seems a fair criticism. Few works of evangelical theology make brilliant new insights. Theirs is rather the voice of persistent witness to a truth that is essentially unchanging.

[30] A definition 'from below' might give a socio-historical description of actual evangelicals. Here I wish to describe not how evangelicals actually are but how they *ought* to be.

sixteenth-century Reformation by direct return to Holy Scripture.'[31] Evangelical designates that theology which focuses on the 'God of the Gospel', that is, the God who reveals himself in the life of Jesus and in the testimonies about him.

Euangelion means good or gladdening news. Because the gospel is news, theology must not shirk the question of truth. Theology is the sustained reflection on this news which seeks to understand it and to apply its 'goodness' to the contemporary situation. What is news? A report of what has happened. There is *news* because there were *events*. The gospel is a Word from God about God acting in the God-man Jesus Christ. The good news concerns what God has *said* about what God has *done*. Why is the news 'good'? Because there has been what Tolkien calls a 'eucatastrophe'—a cataclysmic event with a universal beneficial effect (the opposite of catastrophe). At the heart of *euangelion* is the eucatastrophe of Christ—cross, resurrection, his going away 'for us'. The good news of the gospel thus leads to both the formal principle of the Reformation, biblical authority (the news is *reliable*), and to its material principle, justification by faith (the news is *good*).

An evangelical is one who accepts these divine initiatives—God's saying and God's doing—as the two 'givens' with which theology begins. These givens are the basis of the gifts of faith and freedom. First, the given of revelation: God's Word enables *faith*. Second, the given of redemption: God's Work enables *freedom*. The evangelical accepts, third, the gift of the Spirit of Christ, the power that enables us to appropriate the gifts of faith and freedom. Last, the evangelical accepts the responsibility of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, of using freedom in a way that glorifies God. Evangelical ethics—life in the freedom of the Spirit—can only be a response to God's grace.

The essence of sin is to refuse these two givens. The sin of unbelief is the refusal to accept divine revelation and the gift of faith. The sin of disobedience is the refusal to accept divine redemption and the gift of freedom. The evangelical, on the other hand, enthusiastically affirms the gospel and the divine initiatives on which it depends, as well as the rationality and freedom that ensues. The evangelical is thus one who accepts the *euangelion*, the good news about the eucatastrophe, with joy and thanks. Finally, an evangelical acknowledgment of God's grace, his *charis*, should be characterized by gratitude, by *eucharist*. Evangelical theology celebrates 'God with us' and 'God for us'. As such, 'it can be nothing else but the most thankful and happy science'.[32] *Eucatastrophe—euangelion—eucharist:* the word, the event, the response. This is the glorious logic that underlies evangelical identity.

VIII CREDIBILITY AND EVANGELICAL COMPETENCE

'Credible', according to the *OED*, means both 'believable' and 'worthy of belief'. To be 'believable' is a dubious virtue if it means an easy compliance with culture's values and beliefs. Evangelicals hold the good news to be *true*, not merely morally uplifting or aesthetically pleasing. The real question, then, is whether the good news, and the evangelical response to it, is *worthy* of belief?

A. The Crucial Theological Question: Has God Acted to Reveal and Redeem?

Evangelical theology is not, of course, alone in its dependence on the notion of divine initiatives. But perhaps more than most, evangelical theology affirms a God who speaks, a God whose act is speech and self-expression, a God who communicates. While such an

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[31] K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), p. 11.

[32] K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

idea is wholly foreign to some liberal theologians, I believe that it is both defencible and desirable. Something is missing in a theology that affirms God's love of the world but denies that he can communicate with it. How can we even say that God is love unless we have some idea of what God is up to in the world, and how can we know what God is up to in the world—or even in Christ—unless God could communicate his intentions? Without a reliable interpretive word, we could never identify God's activity in the world. Without the Word of God, the alternative is not just carefully qualified guesswork at what God is doing, but radical agnosticism.

B. The Crucial Evangelical Question: Do Evangelicals Hear and Do the Euangelion?

How credible is our evangelical confession of gospel truth? This question has two parts: has evangelical theology correctly *heard* and *understood* gospel truth? does evangelical theology lead to *doing* gospel truth?

To ask whether evangelicals have correctly heard gospel truth is a question for hermeneutics. Popular opinion tends to confuse and conflate the distinction between literal meaning and literalistic interpretation. By 'literal' meaning I mean the sense of the letter, the meaning of the words in their ordinary usage. If the usage is metaphorical or poetic, then the literal sense refers to its metaphorical or poetic sense. 'Literalistic' interpretation, on the other hand, treats all texts as though they referred to the world in some straightforward way (viz., descriptive, historical). Literalistic interpretation rides roughshod over figures of speech, literary genres, and rhetorical devices in a way that a literal reading does not. Such literalism is better described as *un*lettered interpretation. Evangelical interpretation, on the other hand, should be both literal and *literate:* it should seek the sense of the letter through sensitivity to the language and literary form. The prime hermeneutical directive is, therefore, to respect the ordinary use of words in their literary context.

What about the Spirit? Is Christianity a religion of the Book only? This question nicely divides the sheep and the goats, or at any rate, fundamentalists, evangelicals, and liberals. Liberals link religious experience to the Spirit but fail to preserve the objective revelation of the Word which the Spirit's witness presupposes. Fundamentalists are so concerned to defend the reliability of the Scriptures that they overlook the Bible's instrumental character as an inspired witness to Christ.[33] Evangelical theology follows the Reformers in holding Word and Spirit together. Christ is the content of the Scriptures and the object of the Spirit's witness. 'The true knowledge of God is gained with a teacher and a grammar, the Holy Spirit and the Sacred Writings'.[34] The Spirit is teacher, Christ is the subject, and Scripture is the schoolroom.

Evangelical theology begins in faith and seeks understanding. Faith is a response to a Word which precedes it. Does this mean that evangelical belief is irrational? Not at all. What makes a belief rational is not its having been proven, but rather its openness to criticism, its ability to survive critical testing. On this view, rationality is not so much a matter of beginning with well-founded beliefs as of subsequent testing. Evangelical theology, to be credible must be willing to submit its truth claims to the critical tests of the broader academic and ecumenical communities. Such a view of rationality is well-

[33] One might say that fundamentalism, in its preoccupation with the letter, considers biblical truth to be a kind of *ex opera operato* of the printed word. Ramm calls this the 'abbreviated Protestant principle', for it neglects the witness of the Spirit.

[34] B. Ramm, *Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 64.

suited to a tradition that acknowledges its interpretations to be subservient to the Scriptures.

Yet evangelical theology must be bold as well as humble. Its ministry of the Word leads it into conflict with the idols and ideologies of this world. Indeed, evangelical theology is radically *anti*-ideological, and this for two reasons. To begin with, the first commandment states that 'You shall have no other gods before me'. This effectively prohibits all intellectual and political agendas that claim absoluteness. The cross, too, is a word of judgement on all human attempts to reach God. Theology thus becomes 'the critique of human pretensions in the light of God's gracious condescension in Jesus Christ'.[35] Indeed, this may be evangelicalism's special role in contemporary theology: to cleanse the temple and call the church back to the full truth of the gospel.

Is evangelical theology up to this task? To what kind of community does evangelical theology give rise? Evangelicalism must be careful not to succumb to the siren song of modernity. And certain understandings of inerrancy may be more modernist than biblical in their formulations. It would be the height of irony if our formulations of inerrancy turned out to be a mess of modernist pottage. Above all, we must beware the danger of 'cheap inerrancy', that is, *the profession of inerrancy without discipleship*.

It is not enough to be able to read maps, or even to believe that they lead to eternal life. We are called to be not only hearers and readers, but ministers and doers of the Word. A map is useful only when it is followed. Take up your book and walk! For we can be disciples of Jesus Christ only if we follow the biblical texts. To be a disciple means to be a follower, one who walks 'according to the Scriptures'. Costly inerrancy means not only professing biblical truth but doing it; it means living and dying the biblical truth. It is no coincidence that our word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word for 'witness'. The cost of inerrancy is 'martyrdom'. Inerrancy is not merely a formula to which we pay lip service, but a *mission*.

Measured by this exacting standard, how is the evangelical community doing? Is it flourishing, free, showing the signs of the fruits of the Spirit, known by its love? As we assess the credibility of evangelical theology, I suggest that we focus on the following three areas.

1. Humility. Are evangelicals appropriately self-critical? Intellectual humility means not thinking overmuch of one's own opinions. There is no contradiction between holding convictions and holding them humbly. In theology, humility is next to godliness. It is the necessary condition of true dialogue with others, as well as being a necessary condition for receiving the truth.
2. Creative fidelity. Our theological formulas must be interpreted ever anew if they are not to ossify. Evangelicals must be always reforming, under the authority of God's Word and in the power of God's Spirit.
3. Joyful performance. One of the most powerful pieces of evidence of the credibility of evangelical theology are churches which put such theology into practice. If our theological truth claims are to be intelligible, we must be able to point to a community which embodies them. *Evangelical culture must be eucharistic:* it must celebrate, and consecrate, the gifts of Christian faith and freedom.

IX CREDIBILITY AND CARTOGRAPHICAL COMPETENCE

[35] D. Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), p. 18.

Biblical literacy is as much a way of life as a way of reading, for following this Book entails both a hearing and a doing of its words. The ninetieth question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks: 'How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?' The answer: 'We must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer, receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practise it in our lives.' Receiving the Word with faith and love; practising the Word in our lives. Both are necessary moments in achieving biblical literacy, for the letter must live. When does the letter come alive? When we put it into practice and let it guide our lives. Literacy is 'the ability to understand or follow a text'. We follow arguments or stories when we grasp their point. But 'follow' also means 'to go along after'. To be biblically literate, in the strongest sense of the term, involves both meanings: understanding the Word and putting the Word into practice.

The ancient Israelites had a map—the torah, the law of God that was to govern their walk and lead them to Christ. The tragedy of Israel's history was that, though they had access to maps, they did not follow them. Instead of walking the way, they wandered. In this case, the church should not follow Israel's example but learn from it. All of us, by the way we live, are following some script, some *graphe*. Which map are you using to chart your journey through life? What, on your *mappa mundi*, is the route to the promised land of meaning, joy, and life?

Biblical interpretation involves performance. Think of a pianist who interprets a Beethoven sonata. We speak of Alfred Brendel's interpretation as opposed to Glenn Gould's. Can we really 'perform' texts? Can we put prophecy, wisdom, apocalyptic, narrative into practice? Can we perform doctrine? psalm? Certainly! We do so all the time: the fundamental form of interpretation is the way we live our lives each day. Our behaviour is the true index to what we believe about biblical authority. The Bible lays claim to our whole being: 'Some of . . . [God's] words require our intellectual assent, others our pious submission, others our moral obedience, and others our cultural faithfulness.'[36]

Christian life and thought alike, then, are interpretations of Scripture. Our doctrine is our theoretical interpretation of the Christian story; our life is our practical interpretation. In the postmodern world, the best way to defend biblical authority may be to create a kind of community life in which the Bible functions as authoritative (and liberating). 'No contemporary theory of the authority of the Bible can assume that a person will be convinced of the Bible's authority apart from participation in the community of faith.'[37] To repeat: the fundamental form of Christian biblical interpretation is the corporate life of the Christian church. The church embodies the Word of God—this, at least, is its task, its privilege, and responsibility. In Lesslie Newbigin's words: the church must be a 'hermeneutic of the Gospel'. Think of the congregation as a *living commentary*. Biblical literacy—'following' the Word—should lead to Christian discipleship, to practising the letter in our lives.

How can we be sure our interpretation of the Bible is really biblical? How can we be sure that we are respecting the text and preserving biblical authority rather than imposing our own voice onto that of the text? This is a most important, and sobering, question. I do not think we should be *too* sure of ourselves. We must be confident but not cocky—sure enough to confront blatant falsity and error, but not so sure as to become presumptuous. One should never be complacent when handling a two-edged sword that can pierce to the marrow.

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[36] R. Mouw, 'The Bible in Twentieth Century Protestantism', in *The Bible in America* (ed. N. O. Hatch and M. A. Noll; New york: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 158.

[37] D. Jodock, *The Church's bible: Its Contemporary Authority* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 74.

Can we speak of an 'incorrect' interpretation, or of a bad performance? It is the theologian's task to judge the fidelity and the efficacy of the church's discipleship. The theologian is a critic of the church's performance. Are Christians living according to the intention of the biblical texts? Are they performing gospel, living as though they had died and risen again with Christ? Are they performing parables, living lives oriented to the kingdom of God? Are they performing law, living lives that conform to God's will?

What does it mean to be biblical? Augustine saw the Bible as a blueprint for individual and social existence. If it were followed to the letter, the church would become the City of God. Being biblical means following the text, continuing along the various itineraries of biblical discourse. Can we 'perform' biblical narrative today? Indeed we can: we can 'read' our lives in light of the biblical story. We should 'absorb the world' into the text.[38] Like the apostle Paul, we can read ourselves, and our world, in light of the biblical narrative. Paul reads his life in light of the life of Jesus, and he encourages his readers to do the same: 'Take up your cross', 'Crucify the old man', live as saints risen with Christ. Here are powerful interpretations of narrative that preserve and perform the gospel narrative in new contexts.

Evangelical faith in the Word of God boils down to this single point: the conviction that in the faithful response to and performance of this good news is *life*—life abundant and eternal. Whether or not we are biblically literate will ultimately be shown by the way we live. In a postmodern age where sundry texts and voices beckon to us from all sides to walk many ways, it is of no little comfort to have a Word that has proven to be a reliable guide to generations of its hearers and doers. To be able to follow the Word in faithful obedience—this is the definition of Christian freedom. Do we really believe that achieving biblical literacy is the most important task of the hour? I hope we do. For achieving biblical literacy, in the sense that I have defined it, is ultimately our only hope for achieving genuine human liberation.

X EVANGELICAL CONVICTIONS: ECUMENICAL CONVERSATIONS

Back to the Bishop. In fairness, I should add that Bishop Holloway also observed some good points about evangelical theology: (1) the conviction that being a Christian ought to make a difference in the way one lives; (2) its missionary energy, a centrifugal force which leads from the Word to the world; (3) its preservation of the 'otherness' of the faith (as over against attempts to accommodate it to the prevailing cultural winds). This last point is particularly important. Evangelical theology seeks to preserve the *otherness* of the gospel as opposed to *other gospels*. The gospel of Jesus Christ must not be confused with other words, currently available in the ideological marketplace, that promise freedom but do not deliver it. Where liberal theologians are busy revising the gospel in order to accommodate it to the surrounding culture, evangelical theology preserves the gospel's integrity and confesses its truth: that God acts definitively to reveal and redeem in, through, and as Jesus Christ. Such a confession does not preclude rational conversation, but begins it by acknowledging one's prior commitments. Evangelical theology is, therefore, a theology of confession. Yet in order to be credible, its conversation must be seasoned with the following six ingredients.

1. A Christocentric focus. The Word and work of God in Jesus Christ precedes both faith and theology. God's act in Jesus embodies the divine initiative—the Giver, the

[38] The phrase comes from G. A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Relifion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminester, 1984).

Giving and the Gift (to speak in Trinitarian terms)—to which evangelical theology responds.

2. A canonical scope. As Calvin said, the only Christ we know is the Christ of the Scriptures. That is why evangelicals must be biblically literate. For it is primarily theology that speaks of God *apart* from the written Word of God which today is lacking in credibility. Once speech about God is cut off from the Canon, once theological discourse is deregulated, what is to stop us from saying just about anything about God, and in the name of God? Theology too must guard against taking God's name in vain.
3. A catholic audience. To be sure, neither the gospel nor biblical interpretation is the sole province of evangelical theology. Evangelicals should be theologically literate—conscious of their theological heritage. And they should be ecumenical, in the sense of being in dialogue and communion with all those, yesterday and today, who seek to respond in fidelity to the good news. This is the only way to avoid the dangers of sectarianism and parochialism. What we need today is more people with evangelical convictions who are willing to enter into ecumenical conversation.
4. A self-critical attitude. Evangelicals should not boast. There is nothing sacrosanct about evangelical interpretations and performances. Scripture alone is authoritative.
5. A culture-critical spirit. Evangelicals must be critics of contemporary culture. If theology is the ministry of the Word to the world, one must understand the world in which one ministers. The evangelical theologian should thus be engaged in cultural analysis; 'know thy culture' is a good motto for the theologian. What, for instance, does a top-ten film list tell us about contemporary society, its values, beliefs, and interests? The world must be interpreted in light of the Bible's witness to Christ.
6. A constructive agenda. Evangelicals must 'perform' the biblical 'word view' in culture (and here we have a long way to go). It is only in so far as evangelicals present a viable alternative that it will have something to contribute to contemporary discussions not only about theology, but about society, marriage, and the family, not to mention the nature of human being itself.

Evangelical theology confesses the givens about revelation and redemption in Christ. The Bible is God's Word, Christ is the centre of the Bible, and the Word will only be followed (understood and applied) by those who live in the Spirit. To be an evangelical is to be a humble and joyful Trinitarian interpreter of good news. Confessing gospel truth is the privilege, and responsibility, of evangelical theology. We should not be ashamed of the strangeness of this message. Evangelical theology is essentially the attempt to preserve the 'otherness' of the good news. For the gospel will always be somewhat jarring, if not outright foolish. This is as it should be, because the good news announces the 'impossible possibility' of God made man and the scandal of the cross. Consequently, the day that evangelical theology fails to preserve the otherness of the gospel and becomes *too* credible is the day I give it up.

XI CONCLUSION: THE EVANGELICAL PASSION FOR BIBLICAL TRUTH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Is this evangelical passion for biblical truth out of place in the postmodern world? On the contrary, the passion for truth must be a perennial concern. Why bother about truth?

Because only truth can be relied on. And in this as in every age, we find truth by taking our bearings from the Scriptures, our Word atlas.

We need to raise, in conclusion, one further question. What form shall our passion for truth take today? Most of us, I suspect, have trouble with the end of the Elijah story. For after his victory on Mount Carmel he commanded the people, 'Seize the prophets of Baal'. To be sure, the massacre which followed was no slaughter of the innocents. Elijah was only carrying out what the law commanded, namely, death for false prophets who turn the people to worship other gods. In NT times, the passion for truth takes the form of evangelism, with a goal to conversion. During the history of the church, however, this admirable aim was not always admirably carried out. Conversion often took the form of coercion: your confession or your life. The modern reaction to this approach results in an emphasis not on conversion but on conversation. Indeed, one hears it said today that truth claims are always oppressive, always implicitly totalitarian. For if one party thinks it has the truth, will it not be tempted to excommunicate the other?

Religious debate and division is nothing new, of course. After many years of Christian war, the British Parliament passed the Act of Toleration in 1689. Theologians at the time, such as John Owen, believed that tolerance was a virtue, because they were confident that truth could vindicate itself without instruments of state coercion. However, this Puritan view of tolerance was quickly replaced by a secular understanding. John Stuart Mill argued in his treatise *On Liberty* that, since one cannot prove religious truth right or wrong, the only reasonable attitude is to be tolerant of all positions. Mill's understanding of tolerance is a far cry from Owen's. Mill's is the tolerance of Pilate: the tolerance of not caring enough about the truth; the tolerance of indifference.

Can we combine a passion for the truth with a tolerance for others? We can, and we must. A passion for truth need not make us intolerant of others, though it will make us intolerant of falsehood and deceit. To be passionate about truth means doing one's best to expose the lie. But a passion for truth does not justify the oppression of others who do not agree with us. How then can we make truth claims in a pluralistic world, and in a pluralistic church?

First, we must realize that a passion for the truth is not the same as a possession of the truth. The truth of Christ is a gift of God, not a human achievement. Moreover, the Spirit who leads us into all truth is a gift to the whole church, not to certain individuals, nor even to one denomination. Furthermore, humans are finite and fallible interpreters of God's Word. We can misinterpret what it means. This does not imply, however, that one interpretation is as good as another. Christian tolerance is quite different from the tolerance of Pilate. Nor does being tolerant mean being promiscuous with the truth. On the contrary, Christian tolerance reflects the patience of God himself as he waits for people to come to and to acknowledge the truth.

To have a passion for the truth means, simply, being a disciple, one who follows the way of Jesus Christ, come what may. Elijah said: 'If Yahweh is God, follow him; if Baal, follow him'. We behave according to our beliefs. Our daily lives proclaim, in a manner louder than words, what we hold as true. If we are following Christ, then our passion for the truth must take the form of *his* passion. His was not the kind of passion for truth that oppressed others, even when he confronted them, but rather one that suffered for them. To have a 'passion' for the truth means, ultimately, that we must be willing to suffer for it. Christian tolerance is a matter, not of endorsing, but of *enduring* all things. This must be our evangelical strategy for making truth claims in a pluralistic world. Christ himself has shown us how to be both passionate for truth and tolerant; passion and tolerance alike are a matter of enduring. We cannot beat others into the truth, we must be willing to win

others to the truth through peaceful means, or to wait for truth's own vindication. To repeat: a witness to truth endures, but does not endorse, all things.

As Christians, we are commissioned to endure, to persist in our witness to the truth. We practise the passion of Christ when we speak the truth in love. In the final analysis, to make a Christian truth claim is to engage in Christian mission. Genuine truth-tellers and truth-seekers are not oppressors, but neither are they indifferent to the distinction between the true and the false. They are rather witnesses to the one who is alone the way and truth and life. God's Word is true; it does not disappoint, but delivers. Idols and ideologies will pass away, but the Word of the Lord endures—forever.

How can we be sure that our passion for the truth is not pathological, mere zeal without knowledge? In the philosophy of science, a set of theories or 'research programme' is considered successful if it can withstand critical testing and if it shows signs of 'progressing'.[39] So it is with Christian faith. Evangelical theology, to be credible, must submit to two important critical tests. The church is a life and research programme, guided by the Word and empowered by the Spirit. Its 'success' is measured by the ability to withstand the greatest test of all—the test of time. The way of life generated by the Scriptures has, after all, survived for two millennia, and has spread throughout the world. The first test for gospel truth, therefore, is an *endurance* test.

The other test for truth in scientific theories is whether they are 'progressing'. What counts as 'progress' in the Christian church is related to growth of corporate knowledge. I am using the term 'knowledge' in its rich biblical sense, which involves not only belief but obedience, holiness, and communion. We test our passion for gospel truth by seeing whether we have become increasingly obedient: are we growing in the 'grace and knowledge' of Jesus Christ? Moreover, it is precisely such growth that best serves the postmodern interest in liberation, for our obedience to the truth is precisely what sets us free. By its fruit shall you know a good theory, and practice, of biblical authority.

> The canonical authority of Scripture is the condition of faith and liberty. A faith which does not base itself upon God is not faith; a liberty which does not find its charter in the Word of God is not more than an illusion of the mind, a dupe of social convention, masquerading under the cloak of pretended psychological spontaneity. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (2 Cor. 3:17) and there only.[40]

The biblical maps are still reliable, true guides to what humanity needs most: wisdom, freedom, life. The postmodern world may be largely uncharted, but the biblical maps will not steer us wrong. We have only to follow them in our theology and our practice. We are called to be 'missionary explorers'. That is certainly the spirit in which I have offered these reflections, comments, and criticisms concerning evangelical theology in the postmodern world.

I began with a Scot; let me end with him too. David Livingstone's greatest achievement was his example. Through his map-making mission, he inspired an army of explorers and missionaries to follow him into Africa. My hope and prayer is that you will have been encouraged by my, more abbreviated, missionary exploration, to go boldly into the postmodern world. The maps we have in the Old and New Testaments are profitable guides, in all places and at all times, to the way of truth and life. As we set out as missionary-explorers to minister the Word in our postmodern world, therefore, let us all

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[39] I here have in mind the philosophy of science represented by I. Lakatos, ed., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

[40] A. Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), p. 369.

remember to take our bearings from Scripture. Let us remember, as we journey on, to sound the biblical canon—to the glory of God.

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Circles and the Cross: Reflections on Neo-paganism, Postmodernity, and Celtic Christianity

Loren Wilkinson

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This original and challenging article was first presented to a graduate seminar at King's College, University of London, England in May 1996. The author shows why contemporary paganism offers an alternative worldview and practice to an increasing number of people who are disenchanted with Christianity's perceived inability to relate the human quest to the world of nature. Further, he shows the interconnectedness of the neopagan spirituality to post modernity. The symbol of the Celtic Cross answers the aspirations of the pagan circle, yet transcends it and offers a transforming alternative way. Editor

> *. . . as often as men become Pagans again, the Landlord again sends them pictures and stirs up sweet desire and so leads them back to Mother Kirk even as he led the actual Pagans long ago. There is, indeed, no other way. . . . That is the definition of a Pagan—a man so travelling that if all goes well he arrives at Mother Kirk's chair and is carried over this gorge. . . .*
> C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*

I THE POSTMODERN ATTRACTION TO NEO-PAGANISM

Paganism is on the rise. Evidences of this pagan revival are not hard to find. We see it for example, in feminist interest in 'Gaia', the 'great goddess' of the Earth; in renewed interest in a wide range of 'native spiritualities'; and (especially) in pursuit of the spiritual experience of 'nature'. Consider, for example, 'Pacific Spirit Park' in Vancouver, the thousand acres of dripping ferns, firs and cedars which surround UBC—and Regent College—and which are described at nearly every approach with a sign announcing the entrance to 'a ground for our becoming one with nature'. We see it also behind much of a current wave of fascination with the Celtic—in myth, music and visual art.

Such things are regularly labelled 'pagan' by people who disapprove of them. What is perhaps more significant is the number of persons, publications, and organizations who proudly and approvingly apply that name 'pagan'—or more commonly, *neo-pagan*, to themselves. There are regions in North America (Vancouver is one) where more people would call themselves 'neo-pagan' than Christian. Nor is the phenomenon limited to North