

# Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 37 • Number 2 • April 2013

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# The Bible and our Postmodern World

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**KEYWORDS:** *contextualization, contemporary theology, plurality, aesthetics, Postliberal, marginal, foundationalism, metanarrative*

MAKING THE BIBLE relevant to the contemporary audience is not a new problem but it has been the lasting struggle of Christian theologians. In every age however, two alternatives can always be found with regard to this issue: the more negative responses and the more positive responses to contemporary thought. Such alternatives are unavoidable since from the Christian perspective there are the influences of both divine common grace and sin in every contemporary (secular) thought. Therefore, the right response to postmodernism should be arguably both fascination and aversion.<sup>1</sup> Before mov-

ing to evaluate the opportunity and reduction of postmodernism, we should sketch roughly the main arguments of postmodernism against modernism or in other words, the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity.

## I Change of Paradigm from Modernity to Postmodernity

### 1. Epistemological Foundationalism

First is the shift from epistemological foundationalism. The belief that true knowledge should be based on the

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1 Compare Fatio's designation of the term applied to the relationship between Lambert Daneau and medieval scholasticism in Olivier Fatio, *Méthode et théologie: Lambert Daneau et*

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*les débuts de la scolastique réformée* (=Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, vol. 147), (Geneva: Droz, 1976), 118; quoted from Christoph Strohm, 'Methodology in Discussion of "Calvin and Calvinism"', in: H. J. Selderhuis (ed.), *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research* (Princeton, August 20-24, 2002) (=Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, vol. 388) (Geneva: Droz, 2004), 83.

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first principles from which all else is derived is typical of the modern paradigm. In the words of B. K. Putt,

One can undertake an epistemological archaeology, and 'dig' back through the layers until one can discover a bedrock of first principles (archai) upon which the edifice of learning rests. Only if such a beginning can be located can there be any hope for establishing objective and certain truth.<sup>2</sup>

In the case of Rene Descartes, epistemology is based upon the certainty of the existence of the doubting human self, thus making the idea of doubt the foundation of knowledge. Modern Christian theology for sure did not follow Descartes in claiming certainty is based upon the doubting self; rather it claimed divine revelation as the guarantee of the certainty of faith. Thus a huge difference between both cannot be ignored.

On the other hand, modern Christian theology also tried to demonstrate the reasonability of the Christian faith in such a way that is also compatible with the modern paradigm of foundationalism. The certainty and objectivity of Christian truths were demonstrated by insisting on a set of Christian 'first principles' or presuppositions such as the existence of God, the God who revealed, the God who had a saving plan for humanity, and so on. This is of course not wrong in itself. However, debate, polemics, argumentation, apol-

ogetics, or even evangelization were then reductively directed to combat the basic (secular) presuppositions by showing the supremacy of Christian presuppositions. In other words, Christian witness was understood as a fine demonstration of the battle between the two totally opposing first principles. Apologetics for instance was essentially an archeological process that tried to dig deeper and deeper to discover the first principles or basic presuppositions of the faith. Other principles are superficial if not artificial since they reflect only the deepest assumption of the human heart.

Foundationalist theories have been criticized on the grounds that they are insufficient as a basis for the superstructure of belief and because they lack coherence:

... it is not obvious that we have beliefs which are indubitable, incorrigible, or in any sense intrinsically justified; and hence it is not obvious that we have any beliefs which should count as foundational. Moreover even if we admit foundational beliefs, those beliefs will be defeasible evidence for the rest of what we believe. And this ensures that the rest of what we believe is justified because of the way our evidence globally fits together. But global requirements of this sort are the hallmark of coherence theories of justification.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Metanarratives

Second is the shift from the belief in

2 B. Keith Putt, 'Preunderstanding and Hermeneutical Spiral' in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1966), 203-4.

3 Scott Sturgeon, 'Epistemology,' in *Philosophy 1: A Guide through the Subject*, ed. A. C. Grayling (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 21.

the existence of metanarratives that can also be understood as a shift from the emphasis on unity at the expense of plurality. Unity is not uniformity and diversity does not necessarily lead to fragmentation. However, the modern mind seemed to be very cautious about the potential of disintegration and thereby had been suspicious of every kind of plurality. It reflected on various alternatives from subordinationism in the doctrine of Trinity or highly hierarchical ecclesiological structure to the wearing of a uniform in the communist ideology.

In the tradition of Christian theology, it is appropriate or even necessary to advocate the harmony of the Gospels, of the Laws, of the Prophetic Books, or even of one single book such as the Book of Genesis or a Pauline letter. If there is a place for diversity, then it should be highly subordinated. The thought of one single central (highest) focus dominated the way of doing modern systematic theology. Even in the field of Biblical Theology, advocating many focuses could not be accepted as a sound methodology, especially for the Old Testament. Geerhardus Vos, for instance, pointed out the important role of the principle of successive birth-makings (covenants) in marking the new periods in the Bible. He also believed that in the earlier stages of revelation, there are so many things in common and that greater diversity was reached only in the later periods. The individual peculiarities should 'subserve the historical plan'.<sup>4</sup> Correspondingly, the evangelical message was

focused on the soteriological aspect of the Bible. The plurality of messages that do not emphasize the soteriological agenda was soon to be regarded as unevangelical.

On the other hand, our postmodern world tends to stress plurality not only as fact but also as ideology (that is, pluralism). Uniformity is considered unattractive, boring, and reductive. Postmodernity is searching for richness and diversity instead of logical coherence. It does not even matter whether one still cannot harmonize tensions between two or more opposing ideas. It is the nature of reality that it should always be perceived paradoxically. The search for truth is best described as an ongoing and unsettled dispute that does not need to be settled in a definitive way.<sup>5</sup> Instead of speaking of 'the theology' of the Old Testament, one speaks of 'theologies' in the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> In the New Testament field the particular theological profile of each Gospel can be clearly distinguished.<sup>7</sup> By contrast with the older tradition, one does not try to 'harmonize' the different profiles presented by various Gospels but rather celebrates the multifaceted picture of Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Compare Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 73-4.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) and Rolf Rendtorff, *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Ein Kanonischer Entwurf*, vol. 2: Thematische Entfaltung (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Compare Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 399-523, 659-750.

<sup>4</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 25-6.

### 3. Pure Reason

Third is the shift from 'pure reason' with its concept of (rational-conceptual) truth to the significance of hermeneutical aesthetics. Modern thinking reasoned from the foundation upwards with its optimistic certainty of the power of reason. Even the response to art by Immanuel Kant in his aesthetic theory had been converted into abstraction and conceptual judgment, thereby reducing aesthetic judgment to a matter of merely subjective response. Modern Evangelical theology, following the demand of the age, was demonstrated as science that used modern tools borrowed from scientific method. Charles Hodge in the prolegomena of his *Systematic Theology* described theology as science in a way that 'it must include something more than a mere knowledge of facts. It must embrace an exhibition of the internal relation of those facts, one to another, and each to all. It must be able to show that if one be admitted, others cannot be denied.'<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Hodge even emphasized the more important task of systematic theology compared to that of biblical theology.

Against Kantian tradition, Gadamer argues that the radical subjectivization in Kant has relied on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing human sciences. However, the search for truth cannot be limited to

conceptual knowledge, for interpretation of human sciences in that way will be inadequate. Gadamer asks, 'But is it right to reserve the concept of truth for conceptual knowledge? Must we not also acknowledge that the work of art possesses truth?'<sup>9</sup> Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to art has forced him to revise aesthetical thinking by integrating aesthetics into his hermeneutics. In the last section of his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argued for the inseparable relationship between the true and the beautiful by emphasizing the self-evident presenting nature of the beautiful. This self-evident nature of the beautiful is at the same time that which distinguishes the beautiful from the good:

Obviously what distinguishes the beautiful from the good is that the beautiful of itself presents itself, that its being is such that it makes itself immediately evident (eingleuchtend). This means that beauty has the most important ontological function: that of mediating between idea and appearance.<sup>10</sup>

It is this function of mediating that prevents human beings from succumbing to 'impure imitations and appearances of virtue', for human virtue is frequently described vaguely 'in the unclear medium of appearances' in that it has no light of its own like the beautiful.<sup>11</sup> It is the radiance of the beautiful that saves human beings from the seduction of deceptive copies of the truly good.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 1; see also Stanley J. Grenz, 'Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodernity and the Future of Evangelical Theology', in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1995), 96.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 41-2.

<sup>10</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 481.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 481.

Thus in our contemporary climate, transparency is more highly regarded than rational scientific talk of the truth and the good because truth and goodness can be falsified behind the surface of its mere appearance. On the other hand, the experience of the beautiful or even the ugly reflects such an immediacy that it is believed to offer a better approach in the search for truth. The seductive power of cultural pragmatism, for instance, lies in its offer of immediate experience in the work of (popular) art, creating a generation that desperately longs for continuous entertainment in their lives. The search for pleasure and enjoyment has now surpassed the search for rationality.

#### 4. Certainty of Language

Fourth is the shift from the certainty of language and its single meaning. In modern understanding, language was believed to be referential in nature. It points to a (transcendental) reality out there. It was seen as the medium of conceptualization. There can be thus only one single correct meaning in a text. Equivocation in language was classified as logical fallacy. The modern optimistic view of the certainty of language caused the limitation of the question of truth to the rational-logical mode. The observation of true knowledge required for the most part analytical competence to find and then exclude any logical fallacy. The meaning of a text was believed to be stable and always present to the reader. In post-modern thinking, the meaning of text has to be found in the (social) context of its usage.

In contrast, Jacques Derrida's strat-

egy of deconstruction is committed to finding alternative meanings within a text. For Derrida there is without doubt ambivalence in the text, so that not even the author can impose on it any stable or unequivocal meaning. It is the task of deconstruction to uncover what has been suppressed in a text. Such a philosophical task is therefore textually based. Derrida criticizes what he called the metaphysics of presence that generally employ a hierarchical structure or subordination in treating numerous dualisms by prioritizing one side and marginalizing the other side of the opposition:

The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.<sup>12</sup>

If this dual operation is accepted, then one cannot prioritize (metaphysical) presence without regard for the contingent. All textual writing therefore

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<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc. (inc. 'Afterword')*, ed. Graff, trans. Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 236.

should function in the absence of any determined addressee.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is never an absolute meaning to any text. A more radical reception of Derrida will move to and affirm ontological subjectivity. However, a balanced and perhaps more constructive reception will be positively reminded of the danger of the sin of pride in hermeneutics. Yet, it still does not mean that there is no objective meaning in a text. It rather suggests that the meaningfulness of a text does not depend on its single unequivocal meaning.

### 5. Objective Reality

Fifth is the shift from the objective and value-free view of reality with its belief in a disinterested point of view. The modern understanding of objectivity carried the idea of distant observation on the reality of an object or a fact. Declared bias should be excluded from any objective observation. For Immanuel Kant, the judgment of taste should be based upon disinterested pleasure. Thus, an object can be said to be truly beautiful if it is judged as 'the object of an entirely disinterested satisfaction or dissatisfaction'.<sup>14</sup> The pleasure felt in discovering something beautiful should be neither a pleasure built upon the fact that the object is able to simply satisfy our senses, nor upon the fact that it can serve a practical use desired by us, nor upon the fact that it can fulfill moral requirements.

Thus, the pleasure in the beautiful should move from subjective to objective judgments. It is not built upon our interest in the object's existence but is 'merely contemplative'.<sup>15</sup> By excluding any interest in the fulfillment of moral requirements, Kant confirmed the division of aesthetics from ethics (this is not to say however that Kant did not discuss the relationship between aesthetics and ethics at all).<sup>16</sup> The typical modern compartmentalization of discipline was established.

By contrast, postmodernism tends to have general scepticism of objectivity in the explanation of reality. Thus, human understanding is not the mirror of reality out there; it is rather the social construction of the human mind itself. Therefore, there is no so-called universal truth valid for all kinds of people. What we have is truth only for a certain group or community. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein developed the concept of language-games and models of discourse to address language's diversity of uses and its activity-orientedness. Drawing heavily on Wittgenstein's theory, Jean-François Lyotard criticized the concept of metanarrative in his work, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Lyotard attacked the notion of transcendent and universal truth.<sup>17</sup>

In the various directions of contemporary Christian thought the Postlib-

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Bass (Chicago: University Press, 1982), 375.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Haffner, 1951), §1.

<sup>15</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §5.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance his *Critique of Judgment*, §42, §59-60.

<sup>17</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François Lyotard, *Introduction: The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), xxiv-xxv.



eral theologian George Lindbeck borrows from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to give strong emphasis

on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures. ... The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use ... as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action.<sup>18</sup>

Mirroring Wittgenstein's thought, Lindbeck also argues for a self-referential Bible reading and interpretation that is, there is no need for extraneous references such as reading foreign psychological or philosophical meanings into the biblical text. Lindbeck gives an example of a natural reading of classic literatures such as *Oedipus Rex* and *War and Peace*,

In order to understand them in their own terms, there is no need for extraneous references to, for example, Freud's theories or historical treatments of the Napoleonic wars. Further, such works shape the imagination and perceptions of the attentive reader so that he or she forever views the world to some extent through the lens they supply.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Humanity at the Centre

Sixth is the shift from placing humanity (and its autonomous reason) at the centre. Rene Descartes' famous method of doubt that established the

modern metaphysical foundation for science has put the modern human self-consciousness and reason at the centre. Philosophy was no longer the maidservant of theology (*ancilla theologiae*) but became a scientific discipline. Baruch Spinoza's rationalism excluded doctrines and miracles from the substance of Christian religion by emphasizing the essential role of love and reverence.

Similarly, the philosopher John Locke in England understood Christianity as the religion of tolerance, virtue, and morality. The representative of French Enlightenment, Voltaire, initiated mind freedom, tolerance, and human rights against the Catholic Church. In Germany, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz argued for the conformity of faith and reason. His differentiation between necessary eternal truths and actual truths finally subordinated revelation to reason and theology to philosophy. The rationalism of Christian Wolff understood Christianity as the strengthening of human moral power while rejecting the supernatural concept of revelation.

However, the postmodern critique of reason proposes a model of communicative reason against modern subject-centred reason.<sup>20</sup> Following Kant's distinction between private and public reason, Michel Foucault suggests the dimension of private reason when one 'has a role to play in society and jobs to do' and the dimension of public reason when one 'is reasoning as a reasonable

18 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Minneapolis, 1984), 18.

19 Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 116.

20 Compare Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).



being ..., when one is reasoning as a member of reasonable humanity'.<sup>21</sup>

Long before Foucault's suggestion however, the Neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper already suggested the idea of sphere sovereignty in which each sphere of life should have its own distinctive authority or calling. Here, the reformational theology of vocation/calling was applied to the calling of distinct spheres of life with their particular institutions. If it is applied to the different field of disciplines, it means that each discipline of learning will have its own particular calling. Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty, however, does not necessarily lead to pillarization since it is a product of confessionalism rather than the doctrine of sphere sovereignty. On the contrary, sphere sovereignty will free one discipline from the tyranny of other disciplines.

## II Evangelical Response to Postmodernism

### 1. Context sensitivity

Sensitivity to the context of his audience was one of the most important characteristics of Paul's philosophy of ministry. In his letter to the Corinthians he wrote, 'I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings' (1 Cor. 9:22-23). It should be noted, however, that Paul

did not just unconditionally succumb to the demands of his audience since in the previous verses the same Paul wrote, '... I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) ... I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) ...' (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Thus, context-sensitivity means both accommodation and at the same time critical assessment. The same principle should be exercised towards our contemporary (postmodern) audience.

### 2. Reductionism

Against the reductionism of (modern) foundationalism, two things can be said: first, the Bible itself sometimes uses a foundationalist metaphor to describe human life.<sup>22</sup> Second however, this is certainly not the whole picture of reality described by the Bible. Still in the same gospel, Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven by using another metaphor of leaven and flour.<sup>23</sup> Such depiction does not fit into the foundationalist view of reality. Insisting on foundationalism as the sole paradigm to describe reality does not do justice to the complexity of human life. A sound evangelical postmodern theology therefore should be open to other ways of presenting the reality of life. It means that theology does not deal only with the 'first principles' of knowledge; rather, it should deal also with minor or marginal principles of our contemporary society while employing the

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in: *The Essential Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 43-57.

<sup>22</sup> For example the description of one who built his house on the rock or on the sand in Mt. 7:24-27.

<sup>23</sup> See Mt. 13:31-33.

riches of evangelicalism in answering those contemporary questions.

As an example, the search for immanence in the New Age spirituality will not merely be judged and polemically labelled as a rejection of the qualitative difference between Creator and creation as the 'first principle' of their spirituality thus contrasting evangelical belief (in divine transcendence) with New Age (pantheistic) belief; rather, the evangelical Christian will seek for the richness in the Bible that deals with and satisfies the issue of immanence.

The 'tabernacle theology' in the Old Testament (God's special presence), for instance, can be of great relevance here since its core message is the divine immanence in the midst of his people. This tabernacle theology can also point out its fulfilment in the incarnation of Jesus and its final (eschatological) fulfilment in the life to come, thereby explaining the imperfection or the partial satisfaction of the hunger for immanence in this present world. The communal dimension of immanence can also be emphasized through the intimate fellowship between members of the body of Christ in the acts of loving and being loved.

Responding to such a case as New Age spirituality in a polemical way can be useful sometimes but it is not always so. The exclusive approach of foundationalism does not encourage the pursuit of biblical richness; it rather tends to oversimplify our complex reality by reducing it to certain basic principles that finally lead Christian people to self-satisfaction.

### 3. Metanarrative

Rather complex is the postmodern insistence on the rejection of any kind of metanarrative. On the one hand, the Bible does present the metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, but on the other hand, the question of the nature of rejection of a metanarrative should be considered carefully. What Lyotard criticized in his *Postmodern Condition* is substantially the totalizing nature of a metanarrative, which tends to dismiss the existing tensions and paradoxes of the reality of truth. Against the totalitarian domination of unity over diversity, a contemporary evangelical theology can emphasize the multifaceted picture in the Bible. It is the one and the same Jesus but through the perspectival lens of different Gospels. The plurality of the pictures of Jesus should not be suppressed but rather encouraged. It will not destroy the unity or harmony of the Bible or the four Gospels; it will rather present and witness to the biblical richness, something that our postmodern world is desperately looking for.

Similarly, the Old Testament should be presented with its many theologies, thereby preventing any kind of reductionism by focusing on one central idea. The diverse theological voices or traditions in the Old Testament should shed light on the beauty of its fulfilment in the New Testament instead of vice versa. In the field of Systematic Theology, good and constructive ecumenical dialogues should not be shunned but invited to build a structured pluralism, whereby one's particular theological tradition should not be abandoned but enriched.

In the field of Historical Theology, one should be aware of the danger of

narrow-minded confessionalism that always tries to prove the supremacy of one's own theological tradition at the same level as the supremacy of the Bible. In the field of Practical Theology, particularly in the context of ecclesiological structure and church office, the advancement of many spiritual gifts should relativize the emphasis on one single spiritual gift of the church leader. The presence of faith and love rather than fear and self-love should guarantee the accommodation of different spiritual gifts in the life of the church community.

#### 4. Aestheticism

Against the reductive view of the Word of God as rational-logically presented truth, the aesthetic mode of the Word of God, that is, its beauty should be explored and emphasized. The psalmist witnesses the law of the Lord as 'more to be desired ... than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb'. The Bible supports the aesthetic aspect of the Word of God together with its logical aspect.

Dooyeweerd listed at least fifteen aspects in his Christian philosophy, of which the analytic or logical aspect is only one.<sup>24</sup> Dooyeweerd sees harmony at the heart of this aesthetic aspect.<sup>25</sup>

24 Compare Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. 2, trans. David H. Freeman (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 118-26; see also L. Kalsbeek, *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing, 1975), 40-2, 99-100.

25 Dooyeweerd, *New Critique*, vol. 2, 128.

In relation to the postmodern search for plurality and a multifaceted picture, here is now the time to demonstrate the harmony of the different theologies in the Bible. Unlike the so-called hard postmodernist who is reluctant to resolve the conflicting ideas, a good evangelical theology will try to handle them as creative tensions, to present the biblical message in its multifaceted dimension.

The 'Christology-from-below' in the Gospel of Mark that describes the way of the earthly Jesus as the true Son of God in the so-called Markan secrecy theory<sup>26</sup> and the 'Christology-from-above' of the Gospel of John that starts with the idea of the preexistence and the incarnation of Jesus as the divine revelation of glory and truth<sup>27</sup> are not at odds but in harmonic beauty. Both are high Christology. Similarly, the answer of the problem of evil or suffering in the Book of Job and in the Book of Ecclesiastes, however different they might be, will contribute to the many-sided aesthetic views of the Bible.

An evangelical aesthetic theology should occupy itself with the idea of seeing the glory of God. How does the glory of God relate to ecclesiastic worship, to the process of learning, to work as vocation, to the family life, to the public society, and other spheres of life? Aesthetic theology is greatly concerned with the question of enjoyment and happiness. Though the search for truth and holiness cannot be excluded here, the emphasis should be placed more on the attainment of the highest enjoyment in human life (which is only through and in Christ).

26 Compare Schnelle, *Theology*, 409-12.

27 Compare Schnelle, *Theology*, 669-76.

### 5. Ambiguity

Against the belief in the single meaning of a word, text, or language, whether the Bible rejects any kind of ambiguity or equivocalness of meaning should be made clear. Paul's use of the word *soma* for instance can be distinguished in three different contextual meanings as a neutral, negative, and positive.<sup>28</sup> Even the key term 'lifted up' in the same verse in the Gospel of John carries the double meaning of crucifixion and exaltation.<sup>29</sup> The ambiguity of a word does not necessarily mean denigration. It rather again demonstrates the richness of meaning (and its applications).

It should be noted, however, that the variety of meanings are at the same time not unlimited. There are thus criteria of justification for the multiple meanings of a biblical text. In the case of Paul's *soma*, the justification can be found by referring to the context of its use. In the case of the Gospel of John, the criterion for John 3:14 lies in the preceding verse 13 that refers to Christ's exalted or glorious divinity while for John 12:32 the meaning can be concluded from the following verse 33 which refers to Christ's crucifixion. Both Pauline and Johannine texts require careful discernment to avoid a one-sided interpretation.

### 6. Contradiction

By giving room for this so-called 'language flux', the totalizing power of rea-

son and logic is at the same time regulated. Not every contradiction should be considered as logical contradiction. Apparent contradictions can occur due to the different preference for or even inconsistent use of vocabulary in the expression of one's (theological) thoughts. Without a careful discernment of the use of language in a particular theological tradition, useless polemics will often be hard to avoid. This does not mean, however, that the arbitrary use of vocabulary is encouraged since it easily tends to confuse the intended meanings.

A good evangelical postmodern theology should be able to solve the language problem. This means, first, a careful discernment of the use of vocabularies in their specific contexts; secondly, not to engage in a useless debate or polemics over the preference of vocabularies according to one's own theological tradition; thirdly, the theological contents of the text are of higher importance than the choice of certain vocabularies; and lastly, whenever possible biblical vocabularies should be given the highest preference.

### 7. Objectivism

Concerning the belief in an objective and value-free view of reality, several points can be made. The term 'subjective' should not always be considered as inferior to objective knowledge. The Kantian disinterested point of view can also lead to the truth being very distant, whereas subjective knowledge could also mean personal involvement or engagement with the known reality. There is indeed a positive value in bias-driven knowledge. It is even the nature of truth that in order to fully

<sup>28</sup> Compare Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. M. Eugene Borling (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 495-96.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34.

understand it, one has to place oneself in the truth. Jesus says, 'If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.'<sup>30</sup> The access to the knowledge that Jesus' teaching is God's teaching can be granted through a bias towards obedience to do the will of God and not through a disinterested point of view.

In this regard, Stanley Hauerwas, probably the most important Postliberal ethicist, plausibly says,

Christian convictions are not isolatable 'facts', but those 'facts' are part of a story that helps locate what kind of 'facts' you have at all. ... To emphasize the story character of the gospel is an attempt to suggest that examining the truth of Christian conviction is closely akin to seeing how other kinds of stories form our lives truly or falsely.<sup>31</sup>

For Hauerwas, it is typical that the modern and rational story plainly 'teaches us that we have no story'.<sup>32</sup> What is encouraged in this kind of paradigm is finally the self with its autonomous reason. The authority of the scripture's story is then based upon its practical function in the life of the ecclesiastical community:

Claims about the authority of scripture are in themselves moral claims about the function of scripture for

the common life of the church. The scripture's authority for that life consists in its being used so that it helps to nurture and reform the community's self-identity as well as the personal character of its members.<sup>33</sup>

Does this mean that by grounding the authority of scripture in its function for the ecclesiastical communal life, Postliberalism has reduced the concept of truth to 'internal consistency'?<sup>34</sup> To highlight the setting aside of the correspondence theory of truth in Postliberalism is to miss the persuasive invitation of Hauerwas' theological thought. By emphasizing the nature of truth in its function in the Christian communal life, Hauerwas successfully excludes the possibility of knowing the truth without getting involved in the Christian life. From an evangelical perspective, such a theological statement can be viewed as a form of Christian rhetoric trying to persuade unbelievers to accept the scripture's authority by joining the community of the body of Christ, an invitation that a modern Kantian disinterested point of view has failed to offer.

## 8. Autonomous reason

Concerning the shift from placing humanity with its autonomous reason at the centre to a marginal position, one needs simply to refer to the inconvenient fact of the Copernican Revolu-

<sup>30</sup> John 7:17.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Hauerwas with Richard Bondi and David B. Burrell, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1977), 73.

<sup>32</sup> Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 95.

<sup>34</sup> So, for instance, the criticism by the evangelical theologian Alister McGrath in his book *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 153.

tion postulating that our world is not the centre of the universe; it is placed rather at the periphery. However, it is precisely this marginal world that God so loved and to which he gave his only Son. The hunger for self-significance, usually accompanied by the greed for being at the centre, is a modern mythos that needs to be revisited by evangelical theology. It is not our being at the centre that moved God to love human beings but precisely our marginal position.

Of particular importance here is the theological profile of the Gospel of Luke. Schnelle points out that in the Gospel of Luke, 'God stands beside those who have no rights (18:1-8), the despised and disdained (18:9-14), and those who cannot appeal to their genealogy and social class (7:1-10; 10:25-37; 17:11-19).'<sup>35</sup> It is for those marginalized people that God has shown his mercy and used them in a special way. In the same manner, theology does not have to struggle to become the queen of the sciences in order to be able to powerfully influence the world.

On the other side, theology should not accept the role of victim, one that is increasingly marginalized in our highly secular society. She should rather present its attractiveness by sounding the truth and serving society. By placing herself among the plurality of sciences, theology will encourage other

disciplines to be liberated from the exclusive ecclesiastical power though not liberated from God's truth. The struggle for recognition and acknowledgment in the plurality of sciences should not be asserted by theology since it is God who will use her to fulfil his eternal purpose in the reality of his kingdom.

Without theology there are too many unanswered questions left behind by the false triumph of scientism. There is always a secure space for theology that cannot be occupied by other sciences. Polemical writings directed against other sciences can be reduced and transformed into persuasive and constructive interdisciplinary dialogues. Through her witness, theology could indeed invite other sciences to participate in reflecting the divine glory of our Father's world.

### III The Richness of the Word

To conclude, postmodernism has given us many challenges as well as opportunities to rethink and revise evangelical theology. To be sensitive to the context does not mean to give up faithfulness to the Bible. Many postmodern issues have been discussed and reflected in the Bible. Contemporary evangelical theology just needs to draw from the richness of the Word of God. Together with the apostle Paul, evangelical theologians can become all things to all people, that by all means we might save some.

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35 Schnelle, *Theology*, 477.