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# Four offerings from Gospel and Culture

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## Bill Nikides

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J. Richard Middleton, Brian J. Walsh. *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age*. London: SPCK, 1995.

Trevor Hart. *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*. London: SPCK, 1995.

Andrew Walker. *Telling the Story: Gospel Mission and Culture*. London: SPCK, 1996.

Bob Holman. *Towards Equality: A Christian Manifesto*. London: SPCK, 1997.

It is no great surprise to evangelicals that liberalism and modernism have served to undermine historical Christianity, both through the erosion of confidence of the Bible as received truth, that God is supernatural creator and author of life and that Jesus Christ is the only source of eternal life. Criticism of this Enlightenment backlash to traditional formulations of Christianity, particularly those championed by the Reformation, emerges from different and often unexpected sources. Conservative evangelicals, like all other ideological groups, concentrate on their own responses to these challenges to their faith. They do not, however, represent the only, or even necessarily the best alternatives to liberalism. Particularly in cultures such as ours, where we seem to represent an increasingly isolated minority of the visible church, we often seem to lag in terms of the timeliness, originality and effectiveness of our response.

Lesslie Newbiggin and the group he inspired, Gospel and Culture have been at the forefront of a response to the deleterious effects of modernism and, in some ways, postmodernism in the Church. Newbiggin, a long-time missionary to India used his distance from the West to gain great insight into the effects of modernism on the church in his home country. His views also reflected a substantial dependence on the theological positions of Karl Barth, particularly concerning the importance of viewing the Bible as one complete, final source of revelation. Walker notes that Newbiggin was instrumental in reaffirming the gospel as public rather than as exclusively private truth. Middleton, Walsh, Hart, Walker and Holman all, to one degree or other, reflect Newbiggin and respond to him.

Middleton and Walsh's contribution concerns Christianity's dialogue with postmodernism. They are particularly concerned with safeguarding what they consider to be the essence of Christianity from postmodernism's critique. They see contemporary culture plagued with a 'plurality of voices vying for the right to reality.' Postmodernism has emerged by devastating the modernism from which it emerged. The idea of progress, the staple of the old modernist order, is in abject retreat. Modernist claims to objective, universal truth (whether Christian or secular) have been conclusively exposed as nothing more than power plays, the arbitrary desire to master all other competing views. Such assertions are, according to the authors, 'totalizing visions' like racism. All such claims must go under the knife. Postmodern deconstruction, therefore, puts the lie to all such dogma by ruthlessly exposing biases. Middleton and Walsh appreciate much of this effort, particularly as it uncovers the hidden subjectivism of Enlightenment thought.

They note that the devastation does not stop with a useful purging of modern bias. Postmodernism is a hungry virus that must continue to eat to live. It consumes modernism's imbalances, but continues on to erase every sort of norm and reference. There are no cohesive stories, no grand narratives. Things do not relate sensibly. Carried to its conclusion without modification, it leaves only *homo autonomos*. The authors place their finger on part of the problem. In its aggression, postmodernism serves as its own grand, or meta-narrative. Thus, it destroys all other narratives. In the process, it disconnects people from any ethical bases. Underlying the authors' work is a desire to construct a framework for Christian living.

Their answer is the embracing of scripture in a way that inoculates the church against the excesses of modernism exposed by postmodern critics. In other words, they formulate postmodern-friendly evangelicalism. In doing so, they confront two issues raised by postmoderns. Postmoderns charge the Church with endorsing a totalizing view inexorably bound up in the nature of Scripture. Christianity is, therefore, an expression of intellectual tyranny or imperialism. Middleton and Walsh counter, claiming that the Bible contradicts any tendency to totalize. The Exodus, far from presenting a totalizing theology, presents a community of freedom. Even Israel's travail in the wilderness underlines their inclusion as God's people and the necessity to live in that reality. Most significantly, the gospel points to a Jesus that acted on behalf of the 'excluded other,' leading the way from bondage to freedom. The Bible is, therefore, not a totalizing vision. It frees rather than enslaves.

The authors also address postmodernism's damaging propensity toward autonomy and meaninglessness. Far from being alone and impotent in the world, God's people are privileged with the task of ruling the world. Nor are people left to wallow in their own tragic lives and inadequacies. They are continually being renewed in God's image. Middleton and Walsh's formulary for salvation was, interestingly and to the point, more reminiscent of Eastern Orthodox theosis than it is of the substitutionary atonement of the Reformation. The fact that it is special in God's eyes, however, serves as no warrant for the Church to embrace a 'royal,' totalizing ideology. Christianity is not intended to be a confrontational faith. It must not, therefore, endorse any understanding of the Bible as propositional. I can only wonder what 'thus saith the Lord' means. Their text admirably defends against postmodern critique while it seems to ignore what the Bible says about itself.

Finally *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* summarizes the role of the Bible in the modern world. On one hand, Scripture is presented as our 'nonnegotiable canonical foundation of faith.' On the other, we must guard against using it in any totalizing, rule-making fashion. It cannot, in this sense, be considered as universal. It must be authoritative only in an intrasystemic sense. Moreover, the Bible is an open-ended story which invites people to participate in 'a future that is genuinely unscripted.' Their work concludes with more than a suggestion of open theology and a direct repudiation of orthodox Christianity.

Andrew Walker concentrates on Christianity as a plausibility structure for all of life. Like the other authors representing Gospel and Culture, Walker criticizes the corrosive effects of the Enlightenment. Modernism replaced the traditional Biblical meta-narrative with a secular objectivism which was, in turn, deconstructed. The deconstruction, however, did not lead the Church back toward the rediscovery of its historical

foundations, but drove it into the seductive arms of corrupting consumerism and mass communications. This served merely to accent the modern Christian's propensity to privatize the faith and marginalize the Church. Walker's antidote is a revival of the Bible as meta-narrative. This, he does not wish to employ in order to impose Christian values on society. Rather, he sees in Scripture an invitation to people to abandon their own inadequate stories in favor of joining an older, more coherent one, the gospel.

But what is the gospel? It is, he states, neither a documentary of real history nor a record of God's dictation to humanity. Rather, it is a people's story, sacred because it has been set apart by the historical Church as the inspired doctrine of its apostolic fathers. It is sacred tradition. Walker's formulation echoes an understanding of Scripture standard in the Church prior to the Reformation. Concurrently, it points in directions alien to the early church. He not only moves away from affirming the Bible as historically accurate propositional truth, he asserts that it was 'embellished in the telling as it was in the making.' The Bible, therefore, is a kind of myth, an orally based saga. It is authoritative because the Church has always accepted it as such. One might expect that the Reformation would be praised, given its dedication to recovering the Bible as the authoritative voice of the Church. Walker indeed affirms this, but also criticizes the Reformation for using Scripture to fracture the catholicity of Christendom. He seems to agree with postliberal theology in implying that a particular approach to understanding the Bible is appropriate if it works, rather than because it is true. It is important because it effectively shapes and orders the Church. In this sense, it is subordinate to the Church. *Sola scriptura* is thus turned on its head.

The author finds no solace in Reformation constructs. He prefers to locate Christianity's recovery in a rediscovery of the Bible as an oral story and the Church as an oral culture. He looks to monasticism and early sects for appropriate models, rather than Reformation triumphalism and what he refers to as Calvin's 'ascetic individualism.' These serve as foils for the prevailing consumerism, narcissism and privatization. The recovery of early Christianity's orality and community provide an effective plausibility structure which addresses the threats posed by modernity and its errant offspring, postmodernism. In common with the other works, Walker endeavors to recover the Church by leading it away from its Reformation legacy. Like many other such works, the Reformation is linked to the Enlightenment and its destructiveness.

Trevor Hart's *Faith Thinking* provides the meatiest fare of the present offerings. The title is a digest of his definition of theology. 'Theology is the attempt by faith to understand itself, its object, and its place in today's world.' The definition is notable. It, like theologians such as Karl Barth, George Lindbeck, William Placher and John Milbank, underlines the idea that theology is the domain of the faith community. It is not a practice undertaken by the outside world with supposedly objective methods and practices. No such objectivity is possible. Hart endorses postmodernism's deconstruction of this supposed objectivity. On the other hand, the faith community must not be given a free ride. It must not make assertions that satisfy itself. It must be accountable to a larger audience. Despite its being an activity of faith, Christianity must conform to an external understanding of reality. The problem of modern theology is that these two components have been divorced from one another. Theologians consequently err in either embracing supposed objectivity without a faith commitment or express passionate faith without any sort of accountability for what they believe.

Hart examines the Enlightenment in order to discover how the two boundaries for theology, faith on one side and outside accountability on the other became separated from each other. He sees in Descartes the roots of fragmentation as the Enlightenment asserted the presence of universal truth divorced from the divine. Kant expanded the chasm, completely removing faith from the realm of rational discourse. Ideals such as truth or beauty are mere constructs of the mind, not reflections or revelations of a creator God. Concepts such as ethics, therefore, are not rooted in divine disclosure, but rather in principles of human discourse. The noumenal or upper world becomes the unknown realm of the divine. The lower, phenomenal, knowable world becomes the world of objective discovery.

Hart, like the others, points out that this artificial bifurcation was not only hugely destructive to good theology, it could not last. Thinkers such as Nietzsche exposed the myth of universal, objective, clinical truth. No one can avoid unproven doubts. There is no detached objectivity. There is no purely safe place from which to study and analyze. Everyone believes something and, most importantly, thinks on the basis of that belief. The best we can hope for is arriving at a reasonably reliable, workable vantage point. Hart locates this for the Christian theologian as somewhere within the community of faith as part of an extended ecclesiological tradition. It at least exposes personal biases, even if it cannot ensure 'uncontaminated knowledge.' In this sense, the author is neither a theological liberal, nor an evangelical conservative. He sees the Enlightenment as father of both. Both believe in objective, universal truth. One sees it in rational tools with which we judge the Bible and religion. The other locates it in the clear understanding of an objective, inerrant truth, Holy Scripture. Both, according to the author, miss the mark.

Theology, rather, must be expressed as 'faith seeking self-transcendence through critical reflection in community.' It must, in other words, be accomplished within the faith community **and** conform to external standards of verification. Revelation cannot only be recognized by those of faith. It must be credible to the world not just the Church. It, as Hart notes, cannot be a blind leap, but a carefully reasoned judgment. He arrives at this balance in discourse with postliberals such as George Lindbeck, approving of the latter's intra-systemic perspective, but criticizing his relativism. For Hart, theology has to transcend the faith system, even as it is embedded within it. One senses the concerns of a rigorous theologian at work. He wants to make the theologian accountable for his work.

Hart as with postliberals locates his theology in the 'story.' He refers to his understanding of the Bible as a 'stained glass text.' The meaning is not found in the text itself as a book of facts or propositions. Neither is it found in some search for the sources or ideas behind the text. Rather the meaning is discovered within the context of the story. In other words, it is not to be read conforming to some set of theological propositions. Neither can we ascertain its meaning by filtering it through a sociological or anthropological grid as we would in comparative religion. The text, as Hart states, has a life of its own. The reader remit is to enter the world of the text in order to understand it and retrieve its meaning for us. But what kind of story is it? Is it a true story, and if so, in what sense? Furthermore, if it isn't propositionally true, what gives it the authority that its status as truth once afforded?

Hart accepts modern and postmodern criticism in denying Scripture propositional qualities. For him, Scripture is most accurately studied as both open-ended story and sermon. It is impossible to prove its superiority over other faith stories and its authority does not derive from this. The Bible receives its authority from the church's use of it as Holy Scripture. Once again, in a manner consistent with Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the Bible is authoritative largely because the Church considers it as such. Hart is not suggesting that this makes it any less inspired. Like both of the churches noted, the author sees the Holy Spirit working within the entire process which produced the text, to include the early church councils. *Faith Thinking*, however, is not satisfied with this traditional reading of the text. He wants to see tradition as a point of departure, a kind of starting block for a sprinter, not as an anchor reducing interpretation to anachronism. Tradition should serve as a foundation for theological creativity and critical thinking. He notes that the story, after all, 'offers yesterday's answers to yesterday's questions and concerns.' It seems that what the Bible provides is a way of thinking through things. It is, in this sense, more philosophy than prescription.

We must, as we think through Hart's stated commitment to creative theological inquiry, ask another question. Where does warranted application end and unwarranted theological adventurism begin? What forms the boundary between divine revelation and self-revelation? It seems that what Hart's earnest desire for a continually relevant and acceptable Bible will produce is clay infinitely moldable by any person of faith to any purpose. In other words, what safeguards the text from the reader's own form of totalizing? Hart is right to attempt to free the Bible from the dead grip of historical or cultural anachronism. I am afraid his conclusions will only serve to produce the sort of relativism he wishes to avoid. Furthermore, he makes a great many assertions (read propositions) concerning the Bible itself, but takes away the one thing that could have secured his speculation, the Bible's own assertions concerning itself. In wanting to free the Bible from a propositional prison, he places himself in a propositional cell of his own construction. Whose propositional framework would you rather trust?

Holman, professor of social administration at the University of Bath, left his position to serve as a volunteer on the Easterhouse Estate in Glasgow. Newbiggin's vision for a robust missionary church extending the kingdom into every area of life is given hands and feet in Holman's fierce prose. His is very much a church militant. Holman has no time for ghettoized Christianity. The sine qua non of Holman's concern for the church in society is his insistence on social and economic equality. The basis for his conviction that poverty is morally wrong is anchored in an understanding of the Creation. Neither poverty nor inequality were Creation intentions and ought, therefore, to be eradicated. The Fall, itself, does not justify the Church's reluctance to redress substantial societal imbalance. As proof, Holman offers the Jubilee. He sees, in its regular cancellation of debts and servitude, a repudiation of the class society. In this, he seems to find common cause with a number of modern Christian ethicists, particularly those emerging from the Anabaptist camp such as John Howard Yoder and Anglo-Catholic socialists such as Kenneth Leach and the Jubilee Group.

Holman may have found inspiration in Newbiggin, but his proposals go far beyond and, in fact, conflict with the Bishop. Newbiggin's conviction that the church should serve as the conscience of society without being contaminated by it proves too tentative for Holman's activism. Christians 'should use their economic and social power to

promote the common good, to spread privilege and resources, to reduce injustices, to uphold integrity and honesty.' His goal is essentially social and economic equality. To be fair, he does not consider absolute equality possible, but any surviving inequities would be trivial rather than substantial.

If equality is the goal, Holman's principle of mutuality is the mechanism with which to produce it. Mutuality means creating opportunities for every member of society to participate in some measure of 'giving and accepting.' In other words, Holman sees the very heart of this reformed society as a spirit of cooperation. In a word, he advocates socialism, which he believes reveals the essence of Christianity, not that the embrace of Christianity is necessary for mutuality. He, in fact, asserts that this principle affords the opportunity to work in conjunction with those of other or no faith. What a great contrast with Newbiggin's critique of the Church of England's report, *Changing Britain*, a document which eschewed a public reliance on the Ten Commandments or any other identifiably Christian doctrine. Standing behind Holman's assertions are very basic presuppositions concerning human nature, the Fall etc. Holman militates against acts of human selfishness, but he almost seems to consider these as unnatural. He does not articulate a detailed position on human sinfulness or depravity, but it can be said that he retains a great deal of optimism concerning humanity. There is no hint here of pessimism concerning human initiative or potentiality. All that stands between people and Jubilee is ill-advised selfishness on the part of the poor. His work seems almost a bit naïve in discounting the devastating presence of sin in everyone, rich and poor. Furthermore, Holman must be seen for what he is, an advocate for the poor, and I must add, a formidable one. When there is blame to be meted out, he does not distribute it equally. He is not interested in a balanced academic approach to an ethics of poverty and wealth. The book contains theology, of course, but it is fundamentally a polemic.

Holman's work, in some ways most clearly of the four, exposes the fabric connecting Gospel & Culture, postliberalism etc. Christianity is fundamentally a way of life. It is social, cultural, linguistic, and anthropological. Clearly, Newbiggin endorsed a Christianity firmly anchored in the supernatural. The point is that Gospel and Culture along with other post-Barthian Christian expressions such as post-liberalism, radical orthodoxy and Pauline new-perspectivalism do focus on the church as a sociological phenomenon. The Church is a religious community which focuses on a sacred story. Being Christian means being part of a process of acculturation; you join the group and learn how to function within it. Doctrines are rules which govern life **within** the system, rather than universal expressions of truth.

There is much to learn from these four works and the broad movement of the Church of which they are a part. Walker, Hart and Middleton clearly identify the complete corpus of Scripture as the ground of their thinking. They are, in this sense, manifestly not liberal. They also champion the recovery of the importance of the Church in modern society. In this sense, they are a potent antidote to a privatized Christianity which more closely resembles New Age or Hellenistic mystery religion than it does the 'faith of our fathers.' Church always means covenantal community. They also recognize that the Bible is neither philosophical treatise, systematic theology, nor an anthology of religious aphorisms. It is one, coherent and comprehensive redemptive story.

It is a shame, and perhaps inevitable that this stream of work comes up short in some significant ways. Gospel and Culture, like Barth himself, emerged from, and reacted against liberalism. They are a response to a largely liberal theological hegemony they experienced within the divinity schools, universities and seminaries of the Twentieth Century. Liberalism and modernism were their points of departure. It is in this sense that postmodernists are always a kind of modernist. They are formed in dialogue with the thing to which they compare themselves. Therefore, these four works, and a great many more like them, depart significantly from traditional evangelicalism. There is, most importantly, a profound difficulty accepting Christianity as definite, propositional truth. In case after case, the presupposition is that since liberalism has already destroyed the Bible as the exclusive source of universal salvific truth, we have to see the Bible as something less. We are left unsure of whether or not the narrative **facts** are historically true or whether they are only true in the sense that they form consistent parts of a coherent story. In other words, is the Bible closer to being considered history and biography or is it an epic novel? Additionally, is the authority for the text based on something inherent in it, is it truly prophetic, or is it based on the way the community of faith uses it?

Works such as these are worthy of our attention as thinking evangelicals. They are most certainly flawed both in their presuppositions and many of their conclusions. Is it true that the church's deepest need is to respond to postmodernism's claims? It is, of course, necessary to consider the claims of both moderns and postmoderns, but does the Church need to respond with the assumption that these philosophies must be correct in their analysis? Each of these works seems to operate from a presupposition that Reformation-era Christianity is fatally flawed and in need of contemporary rebuilding. This opinion is not confined to the non-evangelical. Increasingly, evangelicals seem to accept, *ad hominem*, these views. Why should we accept their critique any more readily than they would the views they reject? Contrary to the views expressed in these offerings, the Church's future in this world seems to depend on a thoughtful defense of objective truth as the basis of our grand narrative, the Bible. One might also wish that modern critics of the Reformation would be more seriously challenged to prove their assertions and analogies. In short, it seems high time to reintroduce greater evangelicalism to the Reformers and their world, not in support of reducing the Church to historical anachronism, but because inaccurate history breeds poor theology.

On the other hand, each of these works makes points we would be well-advised to hear and heed. In a world rapidly losing all semblance of coherence, where we seem to face the unacceptable alternatives of Christianity as completely privatized, ghettoized and therefore irrelevant or other worldviews such as an imperialistic Islam, we need a rediscovery of the Biblical Church as true community of the faithful. This is a community unlike the world around it, a community united to a past and part of a larger story, a true story. It is a story emanating from an eternal source calling us to an eternal future in Christ.

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