

THEOLOGICAL METHOD:  
AN EXPLORATORY EVANGELICAL PROPOSAL

This paper presents an exploratory proposal for an evangelical theological method. As such, it will consider some of the most vital ingredients that any sound recipe for theological method must surely include. In part, this will involve answering a number of questions. For example, what is revelation? What role should it play in an evangelical theological method? And what place should be given to reason, Scripture, tradition, culture, and community? Additionally, what is truth, and how can we know it? And what is the relationship of theology to moral development? Is theology merely a theoretical discipline, unconcerned with issues of character and personal integrity? Or is it also a practical discipline that should make us more like Christ in all that we think, say, and do? And if it's the latter, exactly how should it have this effect?

**The Postmodern Context**

As one can see, these are very important questions. So in order to achieve our aim we will need to do some very careful thinking. Before we begin, however, we must first take stock of our present context. After all, our thinking about theological method does not take place in a vacuum. Instead, we inhabit a unique social and intellectual context—a context which influences our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors more than we often realize. Although we cannot consider all of these influences in detail, it will be helpful if we at least take stock of our postmodern context. Here we need to ask ourselves three questions: (1) What is postmodernism? (2) How did it originate? (3) How do we do theology in a postmodern world?

*What is Postmodernism?*

Postmodernism is a difficult term to define. It is used by so many people in such a wide variety of ways that one might be tempted to despair of ever understanding it. Of course, on

one level postmodernism is easy to define. Historically speaking, it is simply what comes *after* the age of modernity, or modernism. While some have tried to link the advent of postmodernism to a particular historical event, James Smith thinks this is counterproductive. For one thing, he says, there is “widespread disagreement about such historical claims.” For another, “it seems naïve to think that a *Zeitgeist* like postmodernism could be spawned by a single event.”<sup>1</sup> So what *can* we say about postmodernism?

One of the most succinct definitions on record is that of Jean-Francois Lyotard: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>2</sup> But wait a minute. Isn’t the Bible a metanarrative? And if so, doesn’t this imply that postmodernism is incredulous toward biblical Christianity? This is certainly what many Christian scholars have concluded. But before we join them, we must first ask whether they have correctly interpreted Lyotard. After all, his statement *is* rather enigmatic. Might he have meant something else by it?

Citing Merold Westphal’s distinction between a *metanarrative* and a *meganarrative* (only the latter of which, in Westphal’s view, is appropriately applied to biblical Christianity), Franke writes, “Lyotard’s incredulity refers to the suspicion and critique of the modern notion of a universal rationality without commitments as a basis for the legitimation of the narrative of modernity. As such, acceptance of this incredulity does not require the relinquishment of the meganarrative and message of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> If Franke’s interpretation of Lyotard is correct, then not only is postmodernism not *necessarily* antithetical to the Christian faith (although some forms of it certainly are), but we may also have uncovered an important element in understanding just what it is that unites the many diverse aspects of postmodernism around a

---

<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv; cited in John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Franke, *The Character of Theology*, 18.

common concern. To be brief, the one unifying theme of postmodernism is its suspicion and rejection of modernism, particularly its claims to objective certainty and universal rationality, both of which are predicated upon a foundationalist epistemology. As Franke puts it, “At the heart of the postmodern ethos is the attempt to rethink the nature of rationality in the wake of the modern project.”<sup>4</sup>

### *How Did Postmodernism Originate?*

Although much could be said in response to this question, we will focus our discussion on just two items of crucial importance: the linguistic turn and the nonfoundationalist turn.

#### **The Linguistic Turn**

Franke notes two key figures in the development of the linguistic turn: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ferdinand de Saussure. Wittgenstein noticed that the meaning of words is dependent on the context in which they are used. This insight led him to formulate the notion of “language games.” “According to Wittgenstein, each use of language occurs within a separate and seemingly self-contained system complete with its own rules.”<sup>5</sup> In Wittgenstein’s view, each of these self-contained systems is like a game—and the meaning of a term is dependent on the particular game one is currently playing. In this sense, “a sentence has as many meanings as contexts in which it is used.”<sup>6</sup>

Saussure contributed to the linguistic turn by observing that “a language is a social phenomenon and that a linguistic system is a product of social convention.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the linguistic symbols we use to construct words and sentences have no intrinsic meaning. Instead,

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

their meaning is determined solely by the linguistic community which uses them. If the community agrees that the symbol “bird” should refer to a creature with feathers and a beak that can fly through the air, then this is the meaning that the symbol shall have. But the community could just have easily agreed to use this symbol to refer to a book, a car, or a human being. “In this sense,” Franke writes, “language does not represent reality as much as it constitutes reality.”<sup>8</sup>

### **The Nonfoundationalist Turn**

The nonfoundationalist turn refers to the rejection by postmodern thinkers of what is often termed epistemological foundationalism. It is important to be clear about the meaning of the term “foundationalism.” As Franke notes, “In its broadest sense, foundationalism is merely the acknowledgment that not all beliefs are of equal significance in the structure of knowledge. Some beliefs are more basic or ‘foundational’ and support other beliefs that are derived from them.”<sup>9</sup> Of course, used in this sense, almost everyone is a foundationalist to some extent. Thus, when postmodernists object to epistemological foundationalism, they are often using the term in a very specific way. Essentially, what they are objecting to is the Enlightenment quest for absolute certainty. Beginning with Descartes, many modernists believed that such certainty could be had by laying a foundation of indubitable or self-evident truths, and then building upon this foundation through sound logical reasoning and good empirical evidence.

Today, of course, many thinkers view this Enlightenment quest as hopelessly naïve and practically unattainable. In Franke’s view, this quest is at odds with both our creaturely finitude (and all the limitations which that implies), as well as human sinfulness. He thus concludes, “The limitations of finitude and the flawed condition of human nature mean that epistemic foundationalism is neither possible nor desirable for created and sinful persons.”<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 28.

Taken together, the linguistic turn and the nonfoundationalist turn have been extremely influential in the contemporary academy. The influence of these intellectual developments has been felt not only in philosophy, sociology, literature, and anthropology, but also in theology. This leads us to our final question of this section: How do we move forward?

*How Do We Do Theology in a Postmodern World?*

It seems that the best way to do theology in a postmodern world is to embrace the genuine insights of postmodernism, while rejecting its excesses and errors. For example, a genuine insight of the linguistic turn would seem to be that words have no “natural” or intrinsic meaning, but that the meaning of terms is entirely determined by the “language game” being played or the linguistic context in which the term is used. This is an important and highly relevant insight for doing theology in a postmodern world.

But there are some postmodernists who go beyond such insights. Their view of language is much more radical and appears to be ultimately incompatible with biblical Christianity. To cite just one example, some postmodernists reject the doctrine of metaphysical realism; that is, the notion “that various sorts of entities, beings, properties, or relations actually exist outside a speaker’s mind.”<sup>11</sup> Not only does this come perilously close to a denial of the biblical doctrine of creation, but it also entails a denial of the referential use of language. Of course, as Christians we can readily grant that “many meaningful linguistic acts do not refer.”<sup>12</sup> We can also grant, contra naïve realism, that many of our statements do not refer “*exactly* or *precisely* to the extra-mental world.”<sup>13</sup> But it is very difficult to see how evangelical Christians can *completely* reject either metaphysical realism or the referential use of language—the denials of which are typically associated with a “strong” reading of Wittgenstein’s contribution to the

---

<sup>11</sup> David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations for Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 353.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 382.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

linguistic turn.<sup>14</sup> As David Clark wisely observes, “Evangelical theology assumes that Christian doctrine describes a real God. It is the power and love of *God*, not merely the power of religious words and the love of human community, that Christian theology describes, interprets, applies, and commends.”<sup>15</sup> Clark’s analysis seems (to me, at any rate) to be correct. And although we do not have space to consider the matter here, similar points could also be made regarding both the insights and excesses of the nonfoundationalist turn.

So where does this leave us? How do we develop an evangelical approach to theological method in the postmodern world? It seems to me that James Smith has given us some good advice. In his view, “the postmodern church could do nothing better than be ancient.” And “the most powerful way to reach a postmodern world is by recovering tradition.” Indeed, he says, “much that goes under the banner of postmodern philosophy has one eye on ancient and medieval sources and constitutes a significant recovery of premodern ways of knowing, being, and doing.”<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, then, the best way for theology to move forward may involve taking a long look backward. An evangelical theological method should embrace the genuine insights of postmodernism, avoid its pitfalls and perils, and reclaim once more the wisdom of the Christian past.

### **Revelation**

What is revelation? Is it opposed to reason, or might reason be a type of revelation? And what place should revelation occupy in constructing an evangelical theological method? These are difficult and controversial questions, so it may be best to begin with a definition of revelation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 376-80. See also Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 25.

*What is Revelation?*

The term revelation has to do with making something known. According to Baillie, “Revelation literally means an unveiling, the lifting of an obscuring veil, so as to disclose something that was formerly hidden.”<sup>17</sup> Although some might be tempted to limit the notion of revelation primarily to the religious or theological sphere, both Gunton and Baillie argue that it is actually more appropriate to view *all* human knowledge as a product of revelation. As Gunton observes, “We require the other if we are to know anything at all; we therefore require revelation if we are to understand our neighbor and the world.”<sup>18</sup> And Baillie concurs, “There is a sense in which all valid knowledge, all apprehended truth may be regarded as revealed.”<sup>19</sup>

In order to demonstrate his claim, Gunton asks us to consider how we acquire knowledge of other persons.<sup>20</sup> Isn’t it true that we come to know others by attending to what they say and do; that is, by attending to what they *reveal* to us? And isn’t this how we also make ourselves known? Even in the case of an historical person like Abraham Lincoln, who we can no longer meet directly, our knowledge is ultimately due to the fact that *someone* attended to the things which Lincoln said and did and then transmitted this knowledge to us in some fashion. So Gunton seems to be correct in affirming that we come to know others through a kind of *revelatory* process.

But Gunton goes even further. He not only thinks that this is how we come to know other persons, he also maintains that it’s how we come to know about the natural world as well. Although many scholars think that scientific knowledge is independent of revelation, Gunton believes this view is mistaken. “Why,” he asks, “in the annals of scientific discovery, are there

---

<sup>17</sup> John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 22-24.

recorded so many experiences which can only be described as experiences of ‘revelation’?”<sup>21</sup> If the natural world did not exist, then we could clearly know nothing about it. But because it *does* exist, as a doctrine of metaphysical realism affirms, it can become the object of human perception, observation, and experimentation. As we observe the natural world, and puzzle over its various features, we can formulate questions and then design experiments to get at nature’s answers. In this sense, what we learn through the scientific enterprise is very much dependent on the *revelation* of nature. Granted, we bring our inquiring minds to the study of nature. But what our inquiry yields is ultimately dependent on what the natural world *reveals*. Although it may involve a very slight overstatement, Baillie’s analysis is basically correct: “Knowledge is indeed an activity of the human mind, yet not a creative activity but only a responsive one. There can be no valid knowledge except of what is already there, either waiting or striving to be known.”<sup>22</sup>

If *all* human knowledge is ultimately based on some form of revelation, then clearly our knowledge of *God* must likewise be based on revelation. And if this is so, then it would seem to follow that there can really be only *one* source for theology, namely, revelation.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, revelation must occupy the centerpiece of our theological method. Of course, as Gunton reminds us, there are a variety of ways in which revelation is *mediated* to us (e.g. Scripture, creation, culture, tradition, etc.).<sup>24</sup> And these mediums of revelation are naturally quite important in constructing a theological method. But since they are mediums of *revelation*, it is clear that revelation must occupy our method’s place of prominence.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, 19. I describe this as a slight overstatement because knowledge, at least on some occasions, *does* seem to involve a creative element (e.g. the knowledge that results from noticing a genuine connection of some sort between two apparently dissimilar things often requires a kind of creative “leap” in one’s thinking, etc.). Nevertheless, Baillie is correct to point out that we can only have knowledge of what is there to be known. In this sense, *all* of our knowledge ultimately results from what is in some sense “given” or “revealed” to us.

<sup>23</sup> I credit Glenn Kreider for this observation, January 15, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 105-25.



*Reason, Revelation, and Truth*

If all of our knowledge is ultimately based on revelation, then is *reason* also a medium of revelation? Since the time of the Enlightenment, it is perhaps the case that, far from being viewed as a medium of revelation, reason has more often than not been viewed as distinct from, and even inherently opposed to, the concept of revelation. As Gunton observes:

In the modern world, the whole concept of revelation is essentially problematic. We appear to be required to make a choice between revelation and autonomous reason. Because it is believed that revelation takes away our autonomy and leaves us in thrall to the authority of others or of the impersonal other, it becomes necessary to replace it with pure untrammelled reason. On the other hand, if reason is autonomous and self-sufficient, we do not need revelation. We need only to find things out for ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, just because secular scholars, influenced by Enlightenment notions, often place reason and revelation in opposition, it does not follow that Christian scholars must do the same. Indeed, it seems to me that evangelical Christians should *not* place reason and revelation in opposition. At the same time, it is not entirely clear (to me, at any rate) whether reason should (or should not) be viewed as a *medium* of revelation. In part, how we resolve this issue would seem to depend on what we mean by a *medium* of revelation. For now, however, I will simply observe that if *all* human knowledge is ultimately based on revelation, then if *any* of our knowledge results from human reason, it must (in some sense) be a *medium* of revelation. But regardless of how this issue is finally resolved, we must still address the nature of reason (at least in general) and the role it should play in our theological method. In addition, we must also deal with the nature of truth. How is *this* concept to be understood?

In a tightly worded argument, Colin Gunton addresses these issues in chapter two of his book, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*.<sup>26</sup> Although Gunton is primarily concerned, in this part of his book, to articulate the way in which human beings can comprehend the revelation of the natural world, his remarks (it seems to me) are also applicable to the way in which we come to

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 20-39. In developing this argument, I am especially relying on Gunton's remarks on pp. 30-39.

know and understand anything at all. In the first place, he appears to view reason as a faculty and power of human beings, which we possess in virtue of having been made in the image and likeness of God. It is this God-given power which enables us to comprehend something of the natural world. But this is only one part of the equation; the other is the work of the Holy Spirit. According to Gunton, “If there is revelation of the truth of the world, it is because the Spirit of truth enables it to take place. To put it another way, the creator Spirit brings it about that human rationality is able, within the limits set to it, to encompass the truth of the creation.”<sup>27</sup> So in Gunton’s view our God-given rationality, in conjunction with the work of the Holy Spirit, is what enables us to gain knowledge of revealed truth.

If this interpretation of Gunton is correct, it seems that he is saying that truth and reality are intimately connected.<sup>28</sup> What’s more, reality is not *merely* a product of the human mind or imagination.<sup>29</sup> Although human beings are part of reality, we are only a part. In addition to us, there is also something more, something with which we find ourselves confronted, something that is simply “given” or “revealed” to us. And this seems to be the point of Gunton’s oft-cited statement by Coleridge: “All Truth is a species of Revelation.” If reality is revealed to us, and if truth is in some sense to be identified with reality, then truth is also revealed to us (i.e. it is a species of revelation). This observation may also help us make sense of Jesus words in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (NASB).

There is no more ultimate reality than God Himself. If truth is in some sense to be identified with reality, then truth must also be identified with God (who is ultimate reality). In this sense, when Jesus claims to be “the truth,” He may be making an implicit claim to deity. Just as God revealed Himself to Moses as “I Am” (i.e. the eternal, self-existent One), so Jesus, in

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>28</sup> A statement often made by Glenn Kreider in class discussion.

<sup>29</sup> Again, this is contrary to the antirealist views of some postmodernists.

claiming to be “the truth,” is possibly making a similar claim. In claiming to be “the truth,” He may be claiming to be the eternal, self-existent, ultimate personal reality. This is further confirmed by observing that if all truth is a species of revelation, then in claiming to be “the truth,” Jesus may also be claiming to be the unique revelation of God to the world. And this is precisely what John’s Gospel has previously told us (e.g. John 1:18). Of course, as evangelical theologians we must still be willing to recognize that *propositions*, as well as *persons*, can be bearers of truth. After all, we not only want to affirm that Jesus is “the truth,” we also want to affirm that the proposition in which He made this claim is *true*; that is, that it corresponds to reality in some way. As David Clark observes, “Taking truth as a property of a person is compatible with emphasizing truth as a feature of propositions.”<sup>30</sup>

It’s interesting to note that Gunton explicitly mentions the similar meaning of the terms “truth” and “revelation” earlier in this chapter. “In Greek,” he says, “both of them carry the suggestion of uncovering, unveiling.”<sup>31</sup> Once again, this helps explain why all of our knowledge must ultimately be based on revelation. For if knowledge, as many philosophers contend, is justified *true* belief, then we can only *know* what is real (not what is unreal); we can only *know* what is true (not what is untrue).<sup>32</sup> And since the reality that we can know (at least in part) is something “given” or “revealed” to us, it is clear that all of our knowledge must ultimately be based on revelation.

### **Varieties of Mediation: Scripture, Tradition, Culture, and Community**

If the argument of the preceding section is correct, then all of our knowledge is based on revelation. But revelation is mediated to us in a variety of ways. In this section, we will

---

<sup>30</sup> Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 361.

<sup>31</sup> Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 83.

consider four that are particularly important: Scripture, tradition, culture, and community. We will begin with Scripture.

### *The Role of Scripture in Theological Method*

What role should Scripture play in an evangelical theological method? In order to answer this question, we must first consider several others. For example, what sort of authority does the Bible have? If Scripture is just *one* form of mediated revelation among several others, then why should evangelicals accord it a *special* place in doing theology? And once the Bible is determined to be authoritative in some way, what bearing should this have on *how* we do theology? These are the questions that we will consider in this section of the paper.

### **The Nature of Biblical Authority**

What is the nature of biblical authority? Why should the Bible be accorded a position of unique respect and authority in doing theology? This last question may actually be a bit more complicated than most evangelicals assume. According to David Kelsey, “most doctrines about ‘the authority of scripture’ are very misleading about the sense in which scripture is ‘authority’ precisely *for theology*.”<sup>33</sup> In order to show how this is so, Kelsey examines the work of seven theologians, demonstrating their different ways of using scripture “to help authorize specific theological proposals.”<sup>34</sup> In order to get the flavor of Kelsey’s analysis, we will take a brief look at just three of these figures.

The first theologian examined by Kelsey is B. B. Warfield. According to Warfield, the Bible occupies a place of unique authority in doing theology because it is the inspired Word of God. Warfield held the verbal, plenary doctrine of inspiration. According to Kelsey, Warfield understood scripture to have been “directly created by the power of God, using men as his

---

<sup>33</sup> David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999), 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

instruments, to produce a book consisting quite literally of the words or oracles of God uttered directly to us.”<sup>35</sup> What’s more, since every word of scripture is inspired by God, the entire Bible is judged to be inerrant.<sup>36</sup> After all, it would make little sense to believe that the all-knowing God could be in error about something. Most evangelicals would feel quite at home with Warfield’s view of biblical authority. For example, evangelical philosopher David Clark declares that “the entire Bible . . . is inspired and authoritative.”<sup>37</sup> But there are other views regarding the nature of biblical authority and we must briefly examine some of these as well.

Karl Barth understood the nature of biblical authority to consist in its ability to render “God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ . . . present to the worshiper in a revelatory encounter.”<sup>38</sup> But scripture does not *always* do this. For this reason, Barth’s view of “the authority of scripture is understood in *functional* terms. The texts are authoritative not in virtue of any inherent property they may have, such as being inerrant or inspired, but in virtue of a function they fill in the life of the Christian community.”<sup>39</sup> From this it can be seen that Barth’s view of biblical authority is quite different from that of Warfield.

The last theologian which we will examine is Rudolf Bultmann. In his view, scripture is authoritative only insofar as it occasions and expresses the self-understanding of faith.<sup>40</sup> But what if a passage of scripture seems to offer an inadequate account of this self-understanding? In that case, it “lacks both authority and unity.”<sup>41</sup> So how can we tell if a passage does, or does not, offer an adequate account of the matter? In Bultmann’s estimation, we must judge each passage

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 82.

of scripture in light of the criteria provided by Martin Heidegger's "philosophical account of authentic existence."<sup>42</sup> Here one can see just how very far we have traveled from the initial account of biblical authority offered by Warfield.

Of course, in our own day theologians continue to discuss and debate the nature of biblical authority. For example, Stanley Grenz and John Franke, taking their cue from Bernard Ramm's "Protestant principle of authority," write, "The Protestant principle means the Bible is authoritative in that it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks. Taking the idea a step further, the authority of the Bible is in the end the authority of the Spirit whose instrumentality it is."<sup>43</sup> They go on to link "the Spirit's enlivening of the text" with the "traditional doctrine of inspiration" found in 2 Timothy 3:16.<sup>44</sup>

This emphasis on the authority of the Bible being ultimately grounded in the authority of the Spirit who both inspired it in the past and "enlivens" it in the present is a welcome addition to the discussion of the nature of biblical authority. As N. T. Wright observes, "the phrase 'authority of scripture' can make Christian sense only if it is a shorthand for 'the authority of the triune God, exercised somehow *through* scripture.'"<sup>45</sup> Of course, none of this means that Warfield's view is incorrect. In fact, it seems to me that his view is actually right on target. The reason the Bible occupies a place of unique authority in doing theology is simply because it is the inspired word of God. In other words, the authority of the Bible is ultimately grounded in the authority of the One who inspired it. It is for this reason that scripture *should* be accorded a special and prominent place in an evangelical theological method, even though it is just *one* form of mediated revelation among many. Because it has been uniquely inspired by God, scripture

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 65.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 23.

possesses a unique authority which other mediums of revelation (e.g. tradition, culture, and community) cannot lay claim to.

### **The Role of Scripture in an Evangelical Theological Method**

If the Bible is uniquely authoritative because it is uniquely God-breathed, then what bearing should this have on how we do theology? It seems that we must recognize that while there are a variety of ways in which revelation is mediated, and all of them are important for doing theology, the Bible nonetheless occupies a special place of authority above these other mediums. As Grenz and Franke observe, it is the *biblical text* which “the Spirit appropriates . . . with the goal of communicating to us in *our* situation.”<sup>46</sup> And since the biblical text is uniquely inspired and uniquely appropriated by the Spirit for the purpose of communicating with the church, the biblical text has a unique authority that the other mediums of revelation do not possess. At the same time, however, Grenz and Franke are careful to issue an important reminder. They write:

. . . the Spirit speaks, but the Spirit’s speaking does not come through the text in isolation. Rather, we read the text cognizant that we are the contemporary embodiment of a centuries-long interpretive tradition within the Christian community (and hence we must take seriously the theological tradition of the church). And we read realizing that we are embedded in a specific historical-cultural context (and hence we must pay attention to our culture). In this process of listening to the Spirit speaking through the appropriated text, theology assists the community of faith both in discerning what the Spirit is saying and in fostering an appropriate obedient response to the Spirit’s voice.<sup>47</sup>

This, then, would seem to be the appropriate role of scripture in an evangelical theological method. The primacy of scripture as the unique vehicle of the Spirit’s communication to His people is recognized and affirmed, and yet the revelatory mediums of tradition, culture, and community are also recognized as important (though secondary) vehicles through which the

---

<sup>46</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

Spirit can also communicate. It is to these other revelatory mediums that we must now turn, and we will begin with a discussion of tradition.

### *The Role of Tradition in Theological Method*

What should be the role of tradition in an evangelical theological method? This is a very important question, especially considering the “disdain” which many evangelicals seem to have toward tradition.<sup>48</sup> But like it or not, we cannot escape from tradition. We are each born into a particular human community that exists in a particular time and place. We are taught its language and educated into its traditions. We are thus, in effect, from the moment of our birth “indoctrinated” into the traditions and thought-forms of our community and culture—a fact which highlights just how interrelated the concepts of tradition, community and culture actually are. We will return to consider this in more detail later. But for now, we want to specifically consider what role the *Christian* tradition should play in an evangelical theological method.

### **Understanding Tradition: A Metaphor**

Colin Gunton asks us to consider an organism as a metaphor of the Christian tradition.<sup>49</sup> He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so also the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched. He then observes, “If revelation is something given in the beginning . . . then it may be argued that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings.”<sup>50</sup> This comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to shortly.

For now, it is important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed,

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>49</sup> Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 85-87.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 85.



something to be *hoped for* and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us within the evangelical tradition—a tradition which, unfortunately, often sees no further back than the twentieth century. At the same time, however, Gunton points out that things can always go wrong: “The organism might become diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”<sup>51</sup> In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant notion of heresy—something which needs to be surgically removed so that the organism doesn’t die, or possibly mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have a tradition of sorts, it could no longer be properly thought of as a *Christian* tradition.<sup>52</sup> It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we reflect on the role of tradition in an evangelical theological method.

### **Scripture and Tradition: A Problem**

Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life”—including tradition.<sup>53</sup> But in order to do this, of course, scripture must be interpreted. And many would agree that the Christian tradition consists largely of the scriptural interpretation of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, he thinks, we neglect this tradition at great loss to the church. For in banishing past interpretations of scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in

---

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 82.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.<sup>55</sup> And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of theological construction. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”<sup>56</sup>

But this leads to the following problem: If scripture is to be brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which scripture is to sit in judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over scripture?

### **Scripture and Tradition: A Solution**

Or have we rather been presented with a false dilemma? In the opinion of Grenz and Franke, this is precisely what has happened. In order to see why this is so, we need only remember how it was that scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us . . .

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>57</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write:

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.<sup>58</sup>

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”<sup>59</sup> In their view, scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God’s other mediums of revelation (e.g. tradition, culture, community, etc.).

### **The Role of Tradition in an Evangelical Theological Method**

Grenz and Franke view tradition as a “source or resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church’s task of both theological construction and dramatic performance.<sup>60</sup> Some of the specific elements of the Christian tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing our theological method are the histories of worship, liturgy, and theology, as well as

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 117-18.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 120-29.

the “classic” theological formulations and symbols of the church (e.g. creeds, confessions, etc.). Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”<sup>61</sup>

One of the most interesting observations that they make, however, concerns the role of tradition in the church’s “performance.”<sup>62</sup> This immediately reminds one of Kevin Vanhoozer’s understanding of doctrine “as *direction* . . . the connecting link between the gospel as theo-drama and theology as Scripture’s performance.”<sup>63</sup> According to Vanhoozer, “The ultimate goal of theology is to foster creative understanding—the ability to improvise what to say and do as disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that are at once faithful yet fitting to their subject matter and setting.”<sup>64</sup> It is here that tradition can make one of its most valuable contributions to evangelical theology. For in knowing how the Church’s past “performers” played their parts, especially in settings and circumstances similar to our own, we will be better prepared to “act” wisely in the great drama of redemption. Tradition, therefore, plays a key role in an evangelical theological method. Not only does it aid in the ongoing task of theological construction, it also provides examples (both positive and negative) which “enable authentic ‘performance’ of the Christian faith by the community in its various cultural locations.”<sup>65</sup>

### *The Role of Culture in Theological Method*

What is the role of culture in an evangelical theological method? In order to answer this question, we must first know what culture is. So what is it? How should this term be defined?

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 127-29.

<sup>63</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>65</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 127.

## Culture and its Influence

Although it is rather long, the definition offered by Lesslie Newbigin is both helpful and thought-provoking:

By the word *culture* we have to understand the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings and handed on from generation to generation. Central to culture is language. The language of a people provides the means by which they express their way of perceiving things and of coping with them. Around that center one would have to group their visual and musical arts, their technologies, their law, and their social and political organization. And one must also include in culture, and as fundamental to any culture, a set of beliefs, experiences, and practices that seek to grasp and express the ultimate nature of things, that which gives shape and meaning to life, that which claims final loyalty. I am speaking, obviously, about religion.<sup>66</sup>

As we read and reflect on Newbigin's definition, the first thing we must surely be struck by is just how comprehensive and all-encompassing culture really is. Once we understand this, we realize that we cannot avoid being influenced by our culture in a myriad of different ways (hence the opening discussion about our postmodern context). We are each born into a particular culture at a particular time. Our initial socialization typically occurs within a family, which is itself embedded within the surrounding culture. From this culture we learn a language, which effects (to some extent) how we perceive reality. As time goes on, we are further socialized through our culture's educational system. We are taught to see the world in a particular way. Indeed, unless we come into contact with people from other cultures who have different ways of seeing and doing things from our own, we may never even think to question the perspective which our own culture has given us. As Richard John Neuhaus reminds us, "*culture* is the taken-for-granted air of ideas, habits, hopes, and fears that we breathe every day."<sup>67</sup> He likens our immersion in culture to that of a fish in water. It is inescapable and pervasive.

---

<sup>66</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 3; cited in Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 103.

<sup>67</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, forward to T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007), 7.

While the influence of culture on our thinking is quite pronounced, it is important to bear in mind that it is not determinative. We can, and often do, question the values of our culture. Occasionally, we may even rebel against our culture's way of doing things. Culture is thus a significant, but not determinative, influence on the ways in which we think and view the world.

### **Culture and Scripture**

If what we have said so far is true, then how does culture affect our ability to understand the Bible? The Bible is the product of people who inhabited cultures very different from our own. They wrote in different languages from our own and sometimes viewed the world in ways that are radically different from that of our postmodern American culture. This presents us with a multitude of challenges in understanding the biblical writings—and, of course, whatever understanding we eventually gain must necessarily be processed through our own, individual, subjectivity.

But be that as it may, we can certainly come to understand the Bible to some extent, and even grow in our understanding over time. In principle, the process is no more difficult than coming to understand *any* text from the ancient world—or in coming to understand someone from the *other side* of the world. And while difficulties are certainly involved, and the difficulties increase as the differences in cultures increase, nevertheless, it would seem to be a relatively well-recognized fact of experience that genuine understanding can, and does, take place. As Richard Lints observes:

To deny that this is the case would be to affirm the absolute isolation of cultures. And if everyone is a product and producer of culture, then in some sense every individual represents a different culture, so if communication is not possible across cultures, we would have to conclude that no two individuals could ever genuinely communicate with each other. Ordinary experience and basic intuition would certainly seem to suggest that this is not the case.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 113.

We have to remember that God gave us the Bible for a purpose, and part of that purpose involves the redemption of some “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9, NIV). This would seem to imply that such people are capable of at least a minimal amount of biblical understanding. Granted, human sinfulness distorts our ability to correctly understand God’s word. Nevertheless, God is able to overcome these difficulties through the ministry of His Spirit in acts of grace, regeneration, illumination, and sanctification. In addition, as Richard Lints reminds us:

The theological foundations for affirming the ability of the biblical message to penetrate the modern culture begin with an affirmation of the relational continuity between God and humanity. We are created in his image with the ability to communicate with him and with each other. The relational discontinuity created by the fall does not destroy our ability to communicate but in fact still assumes it.<sup>69</sup>

In addition to this, David Clark suggests that the Bible is *transcultural*. He recognizes, of course, that the Bible “was written in particular cultures” and that it “bears the marks of these cultures.” At the same time, however, the Bible was written for all people and is therefore applicable to people in *any* culture. “In this sense,” he notes, “the Bible . . . is not acultural, but it is transcultural. So contextualized theology can emerge in any contemporary culture.”<sup>70</sup> In fact, since cross-cultural communication is possible, we can actually have some of our prejudices challenged and blind spots revealed as we take the time to dialogue about scripture with theologians from other cultures. To cite Clark again: “If theologians representing many cultures dialogue about Scripture, a greater clarity can arise as to what Scripture meant, and what it implies for various cultural contexts of our time.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus, while we inhabit a culture very different from that of the biblical authors, which certainly poses difficulties for understanding the biblical text, nevertheless, none of these

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

difficulties is inherently insurmountable. We may never understand the text “perfectly” or “objectively,” but we *can* grow in genuine knowledge and understanding of that which God has revealed to us. As we dialogue with people from other cultures about the meaning of the Bible, and as we faithfully depend on the illuminating work of God’s Spirit, our understanding of the text can be progressively deepened and enriched.

### **Culture as a Medium of Divine Revelation**

Although the worldview we inherit from our culture can sometimes make understanding scripture more difficult, it can also, on occasion, give us true theological insight into things we might otherwise have missed. In addition, culture can even serve as a medium of divine revelation in its own right. Let’s examine these claims one at a time.

In the first place, as Grenz and Franke observe, “reading our culture can assist us in reading the biblical text to hear more clearly the voice of the Spirit.”<sup>72</sup> Of course, when one remembers that the biblical authors themselves made use of the cultural artifacts of *their* day in communicating the gospel message, this is really not too surprising. Thus, in Acts 17 we find Paul offering theological insight about the nature of God and man to the Athenians of the Areopagus by citing, with approval, the statements of two pagan poets. In a similar way, Grenz and Franke point out how the cultural artifacts of *our* day can also help illumine the teachings of scripture. “For example,” they write, “theories about addictions and addictive behavior can provide insight into the biblical teaching about sin.”<sup>73</sup>

But not only can culture illumine the meaning of the biblical text, it can also serve as a medium of divine revelation. To cite Grenz and Franke once again, “Because the life-giving Creator Spirit is present wherever life flourishes, the Spirit’s voice can conceivably resound

---

<sup>72</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 160.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.



through many media, including the media of human culture.”<sup>74</sup> Of course, they are careful to point out that the voice of the Spirit in human culture will never contradict His voice in holy scripture—and scripture always remains the *primary* medium of divine revelation. But at the same time, it simply will not do to claim that the Spirit’s voice is limited *only* to the medium of scripture. Indeed, Jesus Himself told Nicodemus that the wind of the Spirit blows where it wishes (John 3:8; NASB). And this may sometimes be through human culture.

### *The Role of Community in Theological Method*

What is community? Why is it important? In what ways might the church, as a community of believers, serve as a medium of divine revelation? These are the questions which we will attempt to answer in this section of the paper.

#### **What is Community and Why is it Important?**

According to Grenz and Franke, there are three central characteristics which help define the term community:<sup>75</sup> (1) A group of people who consciously share a similar frame of reference; (2) a group focus; and (3) a “person focus.” By this last characteristic they mean that the “members draw their personal identity from the community.” This is particularly important because, in their view, identity formation is the “central function” of a community.<sup>76</sup> It is only in the context of a relational community that we truly come to understand who we are. This is true of the church as well. In the context of authentic Christian community, we not only grow in our knowledge of the Lord and the missionary purpose of the church, we also grow in our knowledge of who we are, and how we have been gifted to serve the body of Christ.

The importance of such community can scarcely be overestimated in our day. Clark cites a study by Steven Garber, who interviewed scores of people about the Christian faith. Some

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 216-18.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 218.

of these people had abandoned the faith they once professed, but others had sunk their roots deep and now had a vibrant Christian life. Garber summarized the results of his study in these words:

Over the course of hours of listening to people who still believe in the vision of a coherent faith, one that meaningfully connects personal disciplines with public duties, again and again I saw that they were people (1) who had formed a worldview sufficient for the challenges of the modern world, (2) who had found a teacher who incarnated that worldview and (3) who had forged friendships with folk whose common life was embedded in that worldview. There were no exceptions.<sup>77</sup>

The results of Garber’s study make it clear why authentic Christian community in a local church is so important. We simply cannot become all that God intends for us to be apart from such community. As Clark observes, “The authentic relationships found in community are a necessary avenue by which individuals develop into mature and spiritual persons.”<sup>78</sup> But not only does such community promote our individual growth and development, it also reveals something of the character of God to a watching world.

### **Community as a Medium of Divine Revelation**

The church is a medium of divine revelation in a number of ways.<sup>79</sup> In the first place, it is important to remember that the church is a creative work of God—not man. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the original band of disciples in Acts 2, He baptized them into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), thus creating a new community known as the church (Col. 1:24). Peter says that Christians are being built up into a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5) and he describes us as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession,” who are to proclaim His excellencies to the world (1 Pet. 2:9). Paul describes us as “God’s fellow workers,” His “field” and “building” (1 Cor. 3:9). And in the book of Revelation, God’s people are

---

<sup>77</sup> Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 111; cited in Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 252.

<sup>78</sup> Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 253-54.

<sup>79</sup> I was reminded of some of these examples by Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 249-50, and Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 236-38. In context, however, both books are discussing the concept of Christian community in general and not how the church can serve as a medium of divine revelation in particular.

described as the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7-8). All of these metaphors and images clearly indicate that the church serves as a medium of divine revelation to the world. What else would one expect from the “body of Christ”?

The church functions as a medium of divine revelation in a number of ways. For example, by proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God, something of God’s love for the world and His plan of redemption is revealed. By modeling the love of Christ through acts of hospitality and service we do something of the same. In fact, Jesus said that “all men” will know that we are His disciples, if we “have love for one another” (John 13:35). So as we love those within the church, and reach out in love to those who are not, we are a medium of the revelation of God’s sacrificial love for the world.

Ideally the church, as a community of love, should also reveal something of the dignity and equality of all human beings. Paul reminds us that in Christ, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). In the church, therefore, there is no room for racism, classism, or sexism, for we are all members of the same body. What’s more, the body also serves as an incomplete, yet genuine manifestation of the eschatological kingdom of God. Concerning this, Grenz and Franke perceptively write, “The community of disciples is a laboratory of the kingdom insofar as it functions as a true community. As we embody the biblical vision of God’s new community we reflect the character of God; thereby we are the *imago dei*.”<sup>80</sup>

The church, then, can serve as a medium of the revelation of God’s love, His plan of redemption, the coming kingdom, and even the nature of God Himself—the community of love enjoyed by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—into which men are invited to participate through personal faith in Christ. The significance of the church as a medium of God’s revelation could hardly be greater.

---

<sup>80</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 238.

## Theology and Moral Development

What is the relationship between theology and moral development? Is theology just a theoretical discipline, unconcerned with issues of character and personal integrity? Or is it also a practical discipline that should make us more like Christ? And if it's the latter, exactly how should this be done?

Many of the authors we have read this semester have attempted to make the link between theology and moral development explicit. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer writes:

The sapiential aspect of theology highlights the tie between knowledge and love. Knowing and desiring to do God's will have always been the twin requirements for fitting rightly into the drama of redemption. Doctrine is short-circuited when it results only in abstract intellection and not active participation. Theology does not simply give us knowledge *about* the theo-drama, as if it were some abstract work of art, but educates us in how to live the way, the truth, and the life today.<sup>81</sup>

In a similar way, Grenz and Franke observe, "Theology must be related to life and ethics. Good theology ought to promote the love of God and nourish godly practice . . . in the context of the Christian community as well as in society at large."<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, both books cite Ellen Charry's masterful work, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, as an important contribution to the literature on the relationship between theology and moral development.

Charry observes how the church fathers "emphasized sapience as the foundation of human excellence." "Sapience," she writes, "includes correct information about God but emphasizes attachment to that knowledge. Sapience is engaged knowledge that emotionally connects the knower to the known."<sup>83</sup> Unfortunately, with the advent of modernity, sapiential theology began to wane. "Theology came to be thought of as the intellectual justification of the

---

<sup>81</sup> Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 252.

<sup>82</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

faith, apart from the practice of Christian life.”<sup>84</sup> Charry’s work is intended to reinvigorate the notion of sapiential theology, thereby restoring the proper connection between doctrine and practice. But what is this connection? How *does* theology lead to moral development?

In the first place, it is worthwhile to observe that theology is the study of God. In the premodern era, many of the greatest theologians held that it is only in *knowing* and *loving* God that human beings find genuine fulfillment and the truly good life. Indeed, Charry notes that the various thinkers examined in her book all believed and taught “that knowing and loving God is the mechanism of choice for forming excellent character and promoting genuine happiness.”<sup>85</sup> What’s more, the “good” life of which these theologians speak cannot be separated from a morally-upright, God-honoring life. The two are *necessarily* linked.

The reason for this is not hard to spot. Man was created in the image of a holy and morally perfect God. He can only find true fulfillment in a loving relationship with his Creator. But man’s sin has alienated him from his Creator. He therefore needs to be forgiven and reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ. This is man’s greatest need. But even once he’s been reconciled to God, he cannot truly enjoy God’s fellowship and love if he continues to practice a lifestyle of sin and disobedience. In order to experience true joy, rest, and fellowship with God, therefore, one must walk with Him in righteousness and love. And this requires a morally-upright life. For this reason, then, a truly joyful and fulfilling life cannot be separated from a morally-upright and God-honoring life. The two are linked together.

Assuming, then, that we are dealing with a Christian, who has already experienced God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ, the question then becomes: What is the relationship between theology and moral development for the believer? What role can, or should, theology play in the formation of Christian character?

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 18.

In the first place, theology, as the study of God, should give us greater knowledge of God, His plans for the world, and how we can get on board with what He's doing. In this regard, Charry takes the title of her book, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, from one of Paul's exhortations in his letter to the Romans: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (12:2 NASB). In commenting on this text, Charry observes that the "development of character will not happen without knowledge."<sup>86</sup> She recognizes, of course, that moral development involves more than *mere* knowledge, but knowledge is certainly important. Ideally, however, "moral formation engages the whole person, not just the mind, so the emotions and behavior must not be left out of account."<sup>87</sup>

Interestingly, as one might have expected, the Bible is very well-suited to just this sort of holistic personal engagement with its readers. The didactic material, such as that found in the epistles, primarily engages the mind. The stories and poetry, on the other hand, can readily engage the emotions. Finally, the reader's behavior is engaged through numerous exhortations to be involved *doing* particular things (e.g. praying, worshiping, using one's spiritual gifts in service to the body, evangelizing the lost, etc.). As we read and meditate on the Bible, then, our entire being is engaged by God with the purpose of making us more like His Son (Rom. 8:29). And one cannot become more like Christ without some serious moral development.

In this regard, it's interesting to note that Paul speaks of our being conformed to the likeness of Christ in the context of discussing the ministry of the Holy Spirit to believers (Rom. 8). The Bible is filled with moral prescriptions that we, in our own strength, could simply never fulfill. Jesus taught that the two greatest commandments were to love God with one's entire being and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37-40). But no one is able to fulfill these commandments in his own power. We need help. And God has given us the help we need

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

through the ministry of His Holy Spirit. The Spirit indwells all true believers (Rom. 8:9). As we yield to Him, and His work in our lives, we are “filled” with the Spirit. As we humbly depend on Him, we can resist the lusts of our flesh and manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25). This is one of the most important ways in which *applied* theology can lead to a believer’s moral development and growth in Christian character. But there are others worth mentioning as well.

For example, Charry observes that a good theological text which aims at moral formation should “make the reader want to have more of something that she comes to see she lacks after experiencing the text.”<sup>88</sup> One particularly effective way of doing this is through telling stories. If a skillful writer can present a morally-praiseworthy character (whether factual or fictional) in such a way that the reader sees the beauty and excellence of such a life, then the writer can help move the reader to “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6). And if the reader is a believer, then who knows where this might end? For the “hungry and thirsty” believer will be motivated to pray, to seek God’s grace and enablement through the power of His Spirit, to live such a morally beautiful life. And if the power of God is unleashed in a believer who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, then one can safely bet that an increasingly Christ-like character is sure to develop.

This leads to one final point that ought to be mentioned. Charry notes that the classical theologians typically viewed moral formation as a process that not only required “emotional engagement with concrete models for emulation,” but also “a social context within which to practice” the virtues being modeled.<sup>89</sup> This observation dovetails nicely with what we said previously about the importance of Christian community. There we cited a study by Steven Garber, who observed that those Christians who had continued to grow in their faith over time had found a Christian teacher to emulate and had also formed relationships with other believers who were committed to living out their faith. This is exactly what the classical theologians

---

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 26.

thought would bring about sound Christian character. These, then, are at some of the ways in which the study of theology can (and should) lead to the development of a morally excellent life.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has offered an exploratory proposal for an evangelical theological method. As we have seen, this has required us to think through a number of difficult, but very important, issues. We began by discussing our postmodern context. After briefly describing what postmodernism is, and how it developed, we concluded that the best way to do theology in our day was to embrace the genuine insights of postmodernism, avoid its pitfalls and perils, and reclaim once again the wisdom of the Christian past. This led to a discussion of revelation, which we argued must be seen as the *single* source of theology. After describing what revelation is, and why all human knowledge is ultimately derived from it, we concluded our discussion by pointing out its relationship to both truth and reality—all of which are intimately related.

Having discussed the concept of revelation in general, we then turned to consider some of the ways in which it is mediated to us. Here we considered the roles of Scripture, tradition, culture and community in an evangelical theological method. We saw that Scripture, having been inspired by God, possesses a unique authority which the other mediums of revelation do not. At the same time, however, we stressed that tradition, culture, and community, while not occupying the privileged place reserved for the Bible, are nonetheless still important mediums of divine revelation and necessary components of a sound theological method.

We concluded our proposal with a discussion of the relationship between theology and moral development. We observed that genuine human flourishing is necessarily linked to a morally-upright life of loving fellowship with, and service to, both Christ and His church. We also articulated various ways in which theology can (and should) lead to such a life. And that is an appropriate thought with which to conclude this paper. For our proposal for an evangelical theological method is not intended to be an end in itself, but rather a *means* of helping others to know and love God—and thereby experience the chief end for which they were made.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baillie, John. *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1956.
- Charry, Ellen T. *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Clark, David K. *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003.
- Franke, John R. *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to Its Nature, Task, and Purpose*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005.
- Grenz, Stanley J., and John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Gunton, Colin E. *A Brief Theology of Revelation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995.
- Kelsey, David H. *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999.
- Lints, Richard. *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Moore, T. M. *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2007.
- Moreland, James Porter, and William Lane Craig. *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Smith, James K. A. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005.
- Wright, N. T. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.