

The Pluralist Predicament

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Introduction

Since Don Carson was only able to write 640 pages on the subject of pluralism,¹ it makes perfectly good sense that I should pontificate on such a small subject in the 20 pages/40 minutes that I'm allotted in this forum! Lest my ironic understatement be too subtle for you, let me acknowledge up front that the topic that I have been assigned is both enormously important and impossibly wide and deep, even for an entire semester's

* This paper might be subtitled, "Ministry Under the Line of Despair Where Truth Is No Longer Acknowledged." I would like to express my appreciation to my colleagues Mike Stallard and Ken Gardoski for reading substantial portions of this paper in early draft forms and making a number of helpful suggestions. My wife also did a substantial amount of tedious proof reading for which I am grateful. Deficiencies that remain, are, of course, my own.

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). This is a magisterial work that ought to be required reading for every seminary student, faculty, and administrator. Indeed, a careful, thoughtful study of this book could serve as the equivalent of several seminary classes in ministry, evangelism, homiletics, hermeneutics, OT/NT introduction, biblical/systematic theology, apologetics, and philosophy. That may sound like a grandiose claim, but I believe it is justified. You ought to do more than read it. You need to understand his argument and be able to explain how it relates to ministry. If my point is not clear, *read this book!*

You will note that I have cited Carson numerous times in the pages that follow, though this is not just a rehash or abridgement of his work. I have cited him where appropriate because his analysis is one of the most astute and comprehensive available. As to the quantity of material available on the subject, suffice it to say that it is enormous and increasing exponentially. Although I have read a substantial number of pages on the subject since Christmas, I have barely scratched the surface of what is available. I do not claim, by any means, to be an authority of the subject. I have tried to determine the pivotal works and spend my time in the primary sources as much as possible, but much has been left untouched. Some key postmodern writers (such as David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* [New York: Seabury, 1975] and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* [Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976]) have not been included. Some of the radical pluralists, particularly the deconstructionists such as Derrida and Foucault, are very difficult to read. This is, in part, due to their deliberate "playing" with language in an attempt to demonstrate that language does not communicate invariant truth. I have sampled both of these writers, but have had to lean more heavily on others' assessments here than I would like.

worth of lectures. Certainly the limited space devoted to it this morning is inadequate. All I can hope to do is scratch along the edges a bit and hope that I stir up enough interest with my scratchings that a few of you will rise to the challenge and do some serious reading. So I intend to present you with a “scratch and sniff” paper—and hope that you are enticed by what you smell. My one consolation with attempting even such limited scratching is that Dr. King, in next month’s forum paper,² is addressing one specific issue related to the same topic, so he can tell you everything else you need to know about pluralism and correct any misconceptions that my simplified, abridged scratching may present. Perhaps I can at least lay the theoretical foundation so that when Dr. King addresses the soteriological and missiological issues you will understand why the questions have arisen.

Our topic falls within the broader discussion of postmodernity—a topic that has received an increasing amount of attention by evangelicals in the last few years, at least in part as a result of Carson’s *Gagging of God*. It is not, however, a new topic nor an abrupt shift in world views. Francis Schaeffer may have been the first Christian thinker to recognize the emerging problem of the modern question regarding truth. In 1968 he wrote that “this change in the concept of the way we come to knowledge and truth is the *most* crucial problem, as I understand it, facing Christianity today.”³ What Schaeffer

² “Is Christ Still Necessary for Salvation?” 3/16/01. Dr. King will focus on the soteriological implications of both pluralism and inclusivism that I will only have time to mention briefly in this essay. My goal is to sketch the bigger picture and summarize the philosophical and theological framework in which Dr. King’s topic must be understood.

³ Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 13. I had not made the connection between Schaeffer’s writings (which I read in the early 70s) and postmodernity until I chased a footnote from someone discussing these contemporary issues who cited Schaeffer. Upon rereading the early chapters of *The God Who Is There* it was immediately obvious that he was addressing the same issues that have since come to be known as postmodernity. In my later reading I also discovered that Millard Erickson has said the same thing: “what [Schaeffer] was reacting to was postmodernism, but before anyone, including the adherents themselves, knew what it was” (*Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the*

referred to as living under the line of despair is what we have come to call postmodernity. The philosophical issues that he addressed in a European context in the 1960s are precisely those that have brought about the transition from modernity to its logical successor, postmodernity. The impact has been enormous, not only in secular society, but also in the church.⁴

Definitions

Let's begin with some definitions. Most of the key terms in this discussion are common English words, but they are used theologically and philosophically with a specialized meaning—often specialized meanings. Some are also semantic greased pigs—hard to define, or at least hard to determine how someone is using the term.

Pluralism

Pluralism can be used in a number of senses and can be applied to diverse areas (culture, ideology, religion, etc.) with different nuances in each. It will be adequate for our purposes to note two such uses. The first, empirical pluralism, refers to the observable diversity that has increased exponentially in western culture. In our own country, once a relatively monolithic culture, there has been a startling increase in racial, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity.

This is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. Those who prefer that culture be variegated, racially mixed, religiously pluriform, and culturally diverse, will judge these

Challenge of Postmodernism [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 63). Chapter 4 of Erickson's book is devoted to evaluating Schaeffer's work in this area.

⁴ Dr. Stallard recommends Robert Bork's *The Tempting of America: The Political Seduction of the Law* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990) as a helpful perspective on the impact of these same philosophical ideas on culture in general and our legal/political system in particular. As it plays out there, Bork's thesis is that "professions and academic disciplines that once possessed a life and structure of their own have steadily succumbed, in some cases almost entirely, to the belief that nothing matters beyond politically desirable results, however achieved ... It is coming to be denied that anything counts, not logic, not objectivity, not even intellectual honesty, that stands in the way of the 'correct' political outcome" (1). In other words, truth is not even a consideration. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987) has addressed the same underlying issues in terms of (secular) higher education.

developments good. The developments themselves may achieve some real good if they serve to break down cultural prejudice, racial arrogance, and religious bigotry. Christians may find the diversity an ideal setting for thoughtful articulation of the faith and for renewed evangelism. Alternatively, those who prefer the stability of recognized cultural norms may find the new pluralities not only discomfiting but vaguely threatening. And it would be naive to fail to acknowledge that these new realities may actually serve to fan the flames of hostility and tribalism...

But however the rise of empirical pluralism is perceived, the brute reality cannot seriously be doubted.⁵

A second use of the term *pluralism* relates to philosophical issues. Here we are not dealing with descriptive concerns, but with an aggressive, prescriptive approach that has enormous implications for a Christian world view and for Christian ministry. In this sense we refer to the claim that “any notion that a particular ideological or religious claim is intrinsically superior to another is *necessarily* wrong.” This means, then, that “no religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true, and the others false, or even... relatively inferior.”⁶ Mutually contradictory statements may, in this pluralistic sense, be equally true and valid. This is not a simplistic claim by those who do not care to be bothered by the opinions of others. It is a sophisticated philosophical system that has been extensively developed and argued vigorously by brilliant minds. (That is not to say that they are correct... but even they wouldn’t dare claim that —if they are consistent!) It is this philosophical use of the term *pluralism* that is the focus of this paper.⁷

⁵ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 17. See also his extended discussion of empirical pluralism on pp. 13–17. See also Mortimer J. Adler, *Truth in Religion: The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), esp. ch. 1.

⁶ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 19. I have quoted here from an opponent of pluralism, mostly because the pluralists that I have read are not very good at stating concisely what pluralism is. See the note below from Anderson for a pluralist’s own statement.

⁷ A related term, often used interchangeably with pluralism, is relativism. The relationship between these terms as they are used in the current discussions of plurality and postmodernity (though not necessarily as they have been used in older discussions; Geisler and Feinberg, e.g., use pluralism as a synonym for “non-monism” in discussions of the nature of reality [*Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 167–74]) has been best summarized by Carson: “‘philosophical pluralism’ is ... an umbrella term that embraces a variety of

The tentacles of pluralism creep into every area of life, not just religion, yet the impact of philosophical pluralism on truth is perhaps most obvious in theology.⁸ The implications of pluralism in the area of soteriology are immense. If no religion is right and none are wrong, then there is neither need nor legitimacy for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why tell a Hindu that he must trust Christ if his own soteriology is legitimate? Why share the gospel with a pagan if you cannot tell him that your message is true? Why preach Jesus to a Muslim if Mohammed was just as much a true prophet as our Savior?

This thesis has been embraced by a number of writers, most notably John Hick who argues that we must adopt a theocentric approach to the question of religion rather than a Christocentric one since all religions lead to the same Ultimate Reality. Christianity has no special status in the pantheon of religions. All are equally true and valid.⁹

contemporary positions that are united in their opposition to the idea that we can know objective truth: e.g., ontological non-realism (there is no objective reality 'out there' to be experienced and known); constructivism ('reality' is merely a construct of social experiences); perspectivism (we can never know reality as it is; the most we can know is reality from our perspective); various forms of relativism (truth, rationality norms, and the like are all relative to, or internal to, particular contexts)" (*The Gagging of God*, 19; Carson credits private correspondence with Harold Netland for these conceptual distinctions). The reader of this essay will notice throughout that various postmodernists reflect concepts of truth that range throughout the spectrum summarized here under the rubric of relativism. For a similar treatment of relativism, see Gordon R. Lewis, "Relativism," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 926–30.

⁸ Pluralism is much more than a religious/soteriological issue, although the present essay will address it primarily in that context. Ideologically, pluralism would argue that one dare not assert the superiority of, say, capitalism over socialism (or vice versa). Hermeneutically it rejects any claim that the author's intended meaning has a privileged position over against any other meaning supplied by the reader—and this as much for Shakespeare, e. e. cummings, J. R. R. Tolkien, Stephen King, or the US Constitution as for the Bible. For an interesting discussion of this in many diverse areas of contemporary culture, see Walter Anderson's volume, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990). This is an "insider's" account that is very frank about the social implications of pluralism and postmodernity. His thesis is cited later in the essay.

⁹ Hick has since moved from a theocentric model to a "reality centered" model so as to include non-theistic religions as well. For a brief overview of Hick's pluralism, see Alister E.

Exclusivism

It is helpful to contrast soteriological pluralism with what is known technically as *exclusivism*. This is the term used to describe the traditional, orthodox view that most evangelical Christians probably take for granted:

that the central claims of Christianity are true, and that where the claims of Christianity conflict with those of other religions the latter are to be rejected as false. Christian exclusivists also characteristically hold that God has revealed himself definitively in the Bible and that Jesus Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the only Lord and Savior. Salvation is not to be found in the structure of other religious traditions.¹⁰

This sort of soteriology is, of course, the polar opposite of a pluralistic one.

Inclusivism

There is a third view of soteriology and of religion in general—a soteric *via media*.¹¹ In between the traditional exclusivism and the more recent radical pluralism is a view designated as *inclusivism*. Since this will be the specific focus of Dr. King's paper, I will only highlight the argument here. This may be defined as "the view upholding Christ as the Savior of humanity but also affirming God's saving presence in the wider world and in other religions."¹² Viewing Jesus as the "Savior of humanity" may sound good—until one realizes that in the view of inclusivism this does not require that a person has ever heard the name Jesus or the good news regarding his sacrificial death. They may be, in the terms of the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, "anonymous Christians."¹³

McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 462–63. Hick's approach will be considered in more detail below.

¹⁰ Harold Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 9.

¹¹ Without, of course, the ecclesiological baggage of that tractarian/Anglican term! (The Tractarians were those 19th C. Anglicans who advocated a return to the traditions of the church. Some, such as John Henry Newman, converted to Catholicism, but others advocated a "middle way" between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism.)

¹² Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 15.

¹³ Jesus Christ is found, according to Rahner, anonymously in "non-Christian believers" and in the non-Christian religions according to the universal, salvific will of God through his Spirit (*Foundations of Christian Faith* [New York: Seabury, 1978], 311–21). This is by no means the

This phrase does not mean that they are silent or secret about their faith, but that they do not *know* that they are Christians. Inclusivism has become a popular alternative in both Roman Catholicism and in the mainline denominations. What is more disconcerting is that it is also making serious inroads into evangelicalism. In the words of a self-professed evangelical, Clark Pinnock,

A middle path has been developing between the two extremes, a megashift in Christian thinking moving us in the direction of greater theological globalism. It can be seen in the Catholic church, in the Protestant mainline, and among a growing number of evangelicals. I refer to a greater appreciation of how wide God's mercy is and how far-reaching God's salvific purposes are. An optimism of salvation is now replacing the older pessimism. Walls of separation are crumbling, the self-protective nervousness in the presence of competitors is diminishing, and one senses a greater willingness to acknowledge the positive ways in which religions contribute to human well-being.¹⁴

Modernity

Since postmodernity is deliberately juxtaposed with modernity, it would be wise to define the earlier system. As it is used in this paper and in discussions of postmodernity

official or even majority view in contemporary Roman Catholicism. For example, Hans Küng (another noted Roman theologian), protests strongly against this terminology, suggesting that this happens "only in the theologian's head" and that such explanations are only a "pseudo-orthodox stretching of the meaning of Christian concepts like 'Church' and 'salvation'" (*On Being a Christian* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976], 98). Yet even Küng goes on to argue that other religions can be considered "ways of salvation only in a relative sense"; *the truth is still to be found in the Roman Catholic Church* (104). "Seen in this way," Küng goes on to say, "Christian *missionary activity* would make sense.... But this would not mean that it was directed primarily to winning the greatest possible number of converts. The real aim would be to enter into genuine dialogue with the religions as a whole, giving and taking, in which the most profound intentions of the latter could be fulfilled" (112; see his entire discussion on 89–116). Both Rahner's and Küng's systems explicitly reject Christian *exclusivism* for *inclusivism*.

¹⁴ Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 12. Note the "colored language" that Pinnock uses: exclusivism is "the older pessimism" whereas inclusivism is an "optimism of salvation" that recognizes "how wide God's mercy is." Earlier on the same page those who hold the orthodox view are denigrated as "hardline restrictivists." I have described Pinnock above as a "self-professed evangelical" because he prefers to describe himself in that manner and also because he still maintains his membership in the Evangelical Theological Society. The validity of that claim is open to serious doubt. In addition to his soteriological inclusivism his advocacy of open theism (cf. Dr. Stallard's last faculty forum paper, "The Open View of God ... Does He Change?" 1/26/01) belies his claim. The annual ETS meeting next fall (Nov. 2001) will address the question of including open theism within the pale of evangelicalism. Hopefully, they will judge it to be out of bounds.

generally, *modernity* (or *modernism*) is not a synonym for the theological term *liberalism*. Although it may be used in that way, the reference here is to the philosophical framework of science, philosophy, and culture that has held sway since the Enlightenment (18th C.) rather than to a theological position. In the modernist world view,

The world was understood to be a rational place; truth was there to be discovered. As naturalism took hold, God was either marginalized (in the deist understanding) or abandoned (the atheist perspective). Progress was seen to be almost inevitable; entire worldviews, including both Marxism and capitalism, were judged to be historically verifiable and believed to be developing according to a sort of natural law.... Modernism still believed in the objectivity of knowledge. In its most optimistic form, modernism held that ultimately knowledge would revolutionize the world, squeeze God to the periphery or perhaps abandon him to his own devices, and build an edifice of glorious knowledge to the great God Science.¹⁵

This has been the world view of western civilization for the past three centuries.

Although much of Christendom has bought into this system, it should not be confused with a biblical world view (despite the insistent efforts of some to brand evangelicalism with that label¹⁶).

The 20th century saw the development of some small but significant “cracks” in the epistemological foundation of modernity. The key figures include Martin Heidegger (1889–1976; *Sein und Zeit* [ET: *Being and Time*], 1927) who pointed out that the interpreter was not an objective knower but one who was subject to a great many subjective influences, Hans-Georg Gadamer (Heidegger’s student, b. 1900; *Wahrheit und Methode* [ET: *Truth and Method*], 1960) who stressed the “preunderstandings” the interpreter brings to the interpretive process, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951; *Philosophische Untersuchungen* [ET: *Philosophical Investigations*], 1958) who argued that words do not have objective meaning—they acquire such only in specific life contexts. As a result, by

¹⁵ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 20, 21; see also 57–64 and Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 15–18.

¹⁶ E.g., Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 14–16, and *passim*.

the later part of the 20th century it was widely accepted that interpretation was contingent, absolute truth was unknowable, and objective interpretation was not possible.¹⁷ These were the ideas that spawned the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty and the deconstruction of Jacques Derridá, Michel Foucault, and Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Postmodernity

Philosophical pluralism and postmodernity are often nearly identical in reference, but they are different terms that may be distinguished. Pluralism properly identifies the philosophical position which rejects absolute, objective truth (as explained above). Postmodernity is the world view that is built on this philosophy—the culture of unbelief. In other words, postmodernity is the larger term describing the system that results from the underlying philosophy.

As the name itself implies, postmodernity is deliberately juxtaposed with modernity. The modern era believed in truth. In the postmodern era, there is no longer any such thing as objective truth. In the words of a postmodern writer,

Most of the conflicts that tore the now-ending modern era were between different belief systems, each of which professed to have the truth: this faith against that one, capitalism against communism, science against religion. On all sides the assumption was that *somebody* possessed the real item, a truth fixed and beyond mere human conjecture. The modern era brought us into a world with multiple and conflicting belief systems. Now the postmodern era is revealing a world in which different groups have different beliefs about belief itself. A postmodern culture based on a different sense of social reality is coming into being.¹⁸

Actually this is only the logical outworking of modernity. Once one removes God from the epistemological equation, makes individuals the measure of all “truth,” and accepts a naturalistic worldview, there is no basis for truth. Western civilization operated on

¹⁷ See the brief summary in Carson, *Gagging of God*, 67–70, or at much greater length, Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

¹⁸ Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, 3–4. Since these two terms (pluralism and postmodernity) are so closely related, they may be used interchangeably at times in the remainder of the essay.

this basis (albeit irrationally) for several centuries. Now postmodernity is attempting to be consistent with the presuppositions of modernity and has concluded that on a naturalistic basis no truth is possible—and modern thinkers are not at all happy with being confronted with their inconsistency. The postmodernist is, in that sense, intellectually more honest than the modernist. One could say, then, that postmodernity is really only “late modernity” (i.e., the most recent stage of modernity) or hypermodernity. As such, it may be a short-lived system despite the pervasive influence it is now exercising.¹⁹

The Pluralist Proposals

The essence of pluralism is, as cited above, the claim that there is no objective truth, that mutually contradictory statements may, in this pluralistic sense, be equally true and valid.

Secular Pluralism

Consider the following samples in the postmodernists’ own words—first the secular philosophers, both the radical pragmatists (such as Rorty) and the deconstructionists (Derridá, Foucault, etc.).²⁰ Rorty says,

I take pragmatists and deconstructionists to be united in thinking that anything can be anything if you put it in the right context, and that ‘right’ just means the context that best serves somebody’s purposes at a certain time and place. Metaphysicians think that there is a Right Context, where things are seen as they truly are, without reference to anybody’s

¹⁹ This is Erickson’s perspective on postmodernity; he suggests that already there are signs of the “next stage” of thought in sight (*Postmodernizing the Faith*, 18–20, 123). Carson’s assessment is similar, though for a different reason: postmodernism “is fundamentally backward-looking, not forward-looking. How could it be anything else? Postmodernism defines itself most clearly in terms of what it isn’t—and that inevitably means a critique of the past. It has nowhere to go, for it has no vision of transcendent reality pulling us onward. It is all rather sad and pathetic” (*Gagging of God*, 136).

²⁰ I have quoted extensively from these writers for two reasons. First, so that you can read their own statements and judge for yourself what they say (depending on someone else’s summary is always a bit precarious), and second, to give you some idea of just how extensive and pervasive these ideas are. I have also tried to select mainline representatives of the positions (often the seminal thinkers) rather than those who have taken up the mantra later.

purposes. So they look for ultimate sources of this, and infeasible presuppositions of that.²¹

In another context Rorty portrays the two major alternatives in contemporary philosophy. It is obvious from his writings that he sides with the second alternative that he describes.

The philosophical battles between the formalists and the historicists—between those who want to isolate atemporal structures and those who think, with Freud, that “chance is not unworthy of determining our fate”—follow the same scenario whether the issue is scientific truth or moral agency. Philosophers on the one side want something to rely on, something that is not subject to chance. Philosophers on the other side try to find ways of preserving most of common sense while keeping faith with Darwin: with the realization that our species, its faculties and its current scientific and moral languages, are as much products of chance as are tectonic plates and mutated viruses. They try to explain how social democrats can be better than Nazis, modern medicine better than voodoo, and Galileo better than the Inquisition, even though there are no neutral, transcultural, ahistorical criteria that dictate these rankings.

The people on one side of this argument call their opponents irrationalists and claim that they are undermining the foundations of modern civilization. The people on the other side retort that their opponents are dogmatic metaphysicians, still in thrall to the self-deceptive, obsolete, religious hope that our species is, somehow, in the care of a power not ourselves, a power that keeps our heads turned toward the True and the Right.²²

More opaquely, Derridá writes,

All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations), this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus, it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural.²³

Erickson provides a helpful synthesis of Derridá’s basic system.

Just as there is no inherent meaning in texts [in deconstruction], which the reader attempts to discover and extract, so also reality as a whole does not contain an objective meaning. Reality can be read differently by different observers. The meaning of reality is dependent on the knower, and each knower has a somewhat different perspective he or she brings to the knowing experience. There is no one meaning of the world, no transcendent center to

²¹ Richard Rorty, “Response to Simon Critchley,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Charles Mouffe, 41–46 (London: Routledge, 1996), 43. Note the capitalization of “Right Context”—Rorty’s lingo for absolute truth.

²² Idem, Review of *Killing Time* by Paul Feyerabend, *New Republic* 31 July 1995, 36.

²³ Jacques Derridá, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Charles Mouffe, 77–88. (London: Routledge, 1996), 83.

reality as a whole. In the final analysis, the world is only an arena of one person's interpretation against another's. Jacques Derridá, on the basis of ideas such as this, calls for the deconstruction both of "ontotheology" (the attempt to give ontological descriptions of reality) and "metaphysics of presence" (the belief that something transcendent is present within reality).²⁴

Every step in the transfer from the original "thing" to a written description of it (i.e., the mental thought about it, the oral speaking of that thought, and the inscription of it in writing) loses meaning. Thus writing can never transfer the original meaning, all writing is a perversion of meaning, every attempt to express the original is bad. Writing is the "original sin."²⁵

Foucault is difficult to read; he cannot be quoted in brief snippets with any accuracy. Part of this is probably due to his own views of language, truth, and reality.²⁶ For a sample of his thought the following summary by one of his "interpreters" will have to do.

The ascendancy of reason and science brought with it a certain impoverishment of human experience, that a Reason that banished Unreason in order to set up its own undivided rule becomes defensive and constantly exposed to attacks from the outside. It is because the successive reigns of reason and science are drawing to a close, because, since Nietzsche, cracks in the humanist edifice have been getting more and more apparent, that what Foucault is saying can be said at all.²⁷

In other words, according to Foucault, we have passed through the modern period in which reason and science governed life, but that is now disappearing as Unreason is reasserting itself. In this new form of unreason, says Foucault, there is only a

²⁴ Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 86.

²⁵ Jacques Derridá, *Of Grammatology*, 17, 35; summarized in Rick Shrader, "The Real Issue of the Dimpled Ballots," *Aletheia* 8.2 (February 2001): 2.

²⁶ The obfuscation of language engendered by postmodernity has been dubbed *pomobabble*. See the article in *U.S. News & World Report* that pokes fun at this use of language: "Tower of pomobabble," by John Leo, 15 March 1999, 16.

²⁷ Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (1980; reprint, London: Routledge, 1990), 80–81. This volume is a combination of a "Foucault Reader" and a commentary. Erickson points out another aspect of Foucault's approach: "Michael Foucault ... contended that every interpretation is put forward by those in power and is thus an exercise of power. Naming something is doing violence to that which is named. Social institutions similarly do violence by imposing their own interpretations on the flux of experience" (*Postmodernizing the Faith*, 86).

“philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one.” Philosophy can only laugh silently when asked for truth. One cannot speak of what does not exist.²⁸

Another influential French deconstructionist/postmodernist is Jean-Francois Lyotard. He argues as follows:

The adviser thus faces a major conflict, in some ways reminiscent of the split introduced by the Kantian critique between knowing and willing: it is a conflict between a language game made of denotations answerable only to the criterion of truth, and a language game governing ethical, social, and political practice that necessarily involves decisions and

²⁸ The following two paragraphs will provide a firsthand sample of Foucault. It is the best short representation of his thought that I have found. The reference to his “philosophical laugh” is found at the end of the second paragraph.

Perhaps we should see the first attempt at this uprooting of Anthropology—to which, no doubt, contemporary thought is dedicated—in the Nietzschean experience: by means of a philosophical critique, by means of a certain form of biologism, Nietzsche rediscovered the point at which man and God belong to one another, at which the death of the second is synonymous with the disappearance of the first, and at which the promise of the superman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of man. In this, Nietzsche, offering this future to us as both promise and task, marks the threshold beyond which contemporary philosophy can begin thinking again; and he will no doubt continue for a long while to dominate its advance. If the discovery of the Return is indeed the end of philosophy, then the end of man is the return of the beginning of philosophy. It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man’s disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled. It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.

Anthropology constitutes perhaps the fundamental arrangement that has governed and controlled the path of philosophical thought from Kant until our own day. This arrangement is essential, since it forms part of our history; but it is disintegrating before our eyes, since we are beginning to recognize and denounce it, in a critical mode, both a forgetfulness of the opening that made it possible and a stubborn obstacle standing obstinately in the way of an imminent new form of thought. To all those who still wish to talk about man, about his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth, to all those who, on the other hand, refer all knowledge back to the truths of man himself, to all those who refuse to formalize without anthropologizing, who refuse to mythologize without demystifying, who refuse to think without immediately thinking that it is man who is thinking, to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh—which means, to a certain extent, a silent one” (*Madness and Civilization* [origin. *Les mots et les choses*], 353–54; *The Order of Things*, 342–43, as cited by Sheridan, *Michel Foucault*, 81–82).

I think that what Foucault is getting at in the first paragraph above is that it is only after we dispose of God that we can finally get back to doing real philosophy—thinking for ourselves without worrying about an exterior absolute that would confine us. Much of Foucault’s writing focused on “madness”—by which he included mental illness (and that appears, on the surface, to be his concern), but which is perhaps better understood as Unreason. His agenda is to destroy any semblance of Reason that has any exterior authority. It is a sad commentary that his conclusion—a silent laugh—is not of much greater value than the laughter of the madmen whom he studied.

obligations, in other words, utterances expected to be just rather than true and which in the final analysis lie outside the realm of scientific knowledge.²⁹

Notice that justice is elevated above truth. But how does one determine what is just apart from truth?

Anderson, a popularizer of postmodernity, argues for a view of “reality” that is socially constructed.

On one side are the objectivists, who see the human mind as capable of more or less accurately, more or less impersonally, mirroring external nonhuman reality; on the other side, the constructivists hold what we call the “real world” is an ever-changing social creation.

The constructivists—whose thinking runs close to my own... say we do not have a “God’s eye” view of nonhuman reality, never have had, never will have. They say we live in a symbolic world, a social reality that many people construct together and yet experience as the objective “real world.” And they also tell us the earth is not a *single* symbolic world, but rather a vast universe of “multiple realities,” because different groups of people construct different stories, and because different languages embody different ways of experiencing life.³⁰

Religious Pluralism

This same rejection of absolutes shows up in religious writers who have absorbed the ethos of pluralism and postmodernity. Francis Schaeffer warned of the danger that was looming in the mid-twentieth century from what he was then calling “the new theology.” By this he referred to that theology which had fallen below the “line of despair,” but which still offered “arbitrary absolutes”—not on the basis of biblical truth, but from an existential basis. He cautioned that “it is against such manipulated semantic mysticism that we do very well to prepare ourselves, our children, and our spiritual children.” Thirty years later we are now the generation facing precisely this issue—not only in those places that he warned that such ideas had already taken root (the mainline denominations and Roman Catholicism [Teilhard de Chardin, Karl

²⁹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1979), 32–33 as cited by Shrader, “The Real Issue,” 1–2.

³⁰ Anderson, *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be*, x–xi.

Rahner, Hans Küng, as well as those such as Raymond Panikkar who are arguing for a synthesis of Romanism and Hinduism],³¹ but also within the ranks of evangelicalism.

Coward, for example, argues that “there is no longer any ground upon which a theologian can make absolute claims for a particular theological position.” Each religion holds non-negotiable absolutes; our need is to be sufficiently mature to allow these opposite [and logically contradictory] beliefs to co-exist “without pretending that they can be made compatible.” Such an approach is necessary since “egocentric narrow-mindedness is always destructive and is the opposite of true religion in any tradition.” (Christian and Islamic fundamentalism are cited as the classic examples of this destructive attitude.) In other words, there are no absolutes; truth is not exclusive—though one must wonder how Coward can make absolute statements in this context, viz., “egocentric narrow-mindedness is *always* destructive”! (He also dictates that “*all* future theologizing with the intent of establishing ultimate truth claims *must cease*” and that “the Buddha’s teaching of critical tolerance and moral compassion *always must be observed*.”) No longer can we be so simplistic as to employ the laws of non-contradiction to resolve contradictory truth claims by various religions. That was the scholastic pattern and it no longer serves the modern citizen of a pluralistic world.³²

Or consider Samartha’s assertion that “there is no reason to claim that the religion developed in the Sinai desert is superior to that developed on the banks of the Ganga.” He would propose an exclusiveness of commitment, not an exclusiveness of possession. At greater length he argues that we must

recognize God alone as Absolute and ... consider all religions to be relative. Religious particularities are not denied, but the ambiguity of religions as historical phenomena is

³¹ *The God Who Is There*, 84, 82–84. One of the best, concise explanations of existentialism is to be found in Schaeffer’s later book, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1972), 46–48.

³² Harold Coward, *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 104, 39, 100, 105, 101; cf. 95.

recognized. The relativization of religions would liberate their respective adherents from a self-imposed obligation to defend their particular community of faith over against others, in order to be free to point to the ultimacy of God, who holds all things and all people in his embrace.

... To acknowledge the fact of religious pluralism means that one cannot take shelter in neutral or objective ground. There is no theological helicopter that can help us rise above all religions and to look down upon the terrain below in lofty condescension. *Our* standpoint, there has to be Christian; but by the same token our neighbors are also free to have *their* particular standpoints.³³

Samartha also rejects propositional truth, arguing that truth is “relational” instead. If, therefore, we really trust Christ, we must dialogue with people of other faiths in our quest for truth, especially since “Christians do not have a monopoly of truth.” Since truth is not propositional, “the deepest truths of any religion cannot be distilled into clear, rational, logical, and self-evident propositions to be compared with the truth of another religion.”³⁴

The popular notion that truth is something static, sitting rocklike and steady *out there* for people below to look at and respond, should be rejected.... the classical outlook, reflected in the New Testament and in Western thought until the Enlightenment, assumed that truth could be only one and unchanging and so normative for all, whereas modern historical consciousness regards all statements about truth to be in process, subject to many expressions, and so not normative in the “once-for-all” sense.³⁵

One of the most influential scholars in the 20th C. discussion of religious pluralism has been Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He argues for a pluralistic view in which all religions are equally valid, even though God has been, perhaps, most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Consider his arguments.

Except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: “We are saved and you are damned,” or, “We believe that we know God, and we are right; you believe that you know God, and you are totally wrong.”

³³ S. J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue: Ecumenical Issues in Inter-Religious Relationships* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981), 99, 96, 97. Samartha represents the view of the World Council of Churches where he was director of their unit on “Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies.”

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11, 42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 153–54.

This is intolerable from merely human standards. It is doubly so from Christian ones. Any position that antagonizes and alienates rather than reconciles, that is arrogant rather than humble, that promotes segregation rather than brotherhood, that is unlovely, is *ipso facto* un-Christian.³⁶

A major part of his basis for such a pluralistic claim is explicitly epistemological: he rejects the force of logic. Note too his (postmodern) claim that we have finally shed our reliance on Western logic.

The only basis on which their position [i.e., the exclusivist's] can and does rest is a logical inference. It seems to them a theoretical implication of what they themselves consider to be true, that other peoples' faith *must* be illusory.... It is far too sweeping to condemn the great majority of mankind to lives of utter meaninglessness and perhaps to Hell, simply on the basis of what seems to some individuals the force of logic. Part of what the Western world has been doing for the last four centuries has been learning to get away from this kind of reliance on purely logical structures, totally untested by experience or by any other consideration. The damnation of my neighbor is too weighty a matter to rest on a syllogism.³⁷

In other words, the law of non-contradiction is not valid in this instance: both my faith and other peoples' faith, even though they contradict each other, must both be true. (He does not entertain the alternate logical possibility that both could be false.) Smith also uses *faith* in a very loose sense, apparently for some abstract religious feeling apart from any particular object. He also goes on to consider the potential that exclusivism is based on revelation—but denies that revelation is propositional and that an exclusivist understanding of revelation “is human and fallible, is partial, and in this case is in some ways wrong.”³⁸

When we come to consider the system of religious pluralism proposed by John Hick we are on much more explicitly theological grounds and we face an hypothesis that has been developed much more extensively than most of those already cited. Hick has written voluminously and (for the most part) clearly. It is also of greater significance in

³⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Religious Diversity*, ed. W. G. Oxtoby (New York: Crossroad, 1976), 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17, 18.

that Hick comes from an evangelical background. He recounts his religious pilgrimage on a number of occasions. During his university days as a devotee of Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell he experienced a “powerful evangelical conversion” and became active in the ministry of InterVarsity, later studying theology and pastoring an evangelical church. From that beginning—not much different from your present experience—he has progressively moved a long way from his theological roots to become the leading advocate of radical religious pluralism.³⁹

Perhaps the best, concise summary of Hick’s pluralistic system is as follows:

My conclusion, then, is that the differences between the root concepts and experiences of the different religions, their different and often conflicting historical and trans-historical beliefs, their incommensurable mythologies, and the diverse and ramifying belief-systems into which all these are built, are compatible with the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.⁴⁰

³⁹ One of Hick’s autobiographical accounts may be found in his essay “A Pluralist View” found in the volume *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, 29–59 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 29–33. (This book was formerly published under the title *More Than One Way?*) Although it is tempting glibly to cite 1 John 2:19 and pass by “on the other side,” Hick’s experience ought to serve as a caution to all of us. We are perhaps more capable of such a departure than we realize. A week before I first presented this essay I learned that one of my former classmates, an M.Div. graduate from this seminary and formerly on the pastoral staff of one of the larger churches in our fellowship, now a head coach at a major American university (nationally ranked #4 in his sport), has, in his years since seminary, repudiated all faith, contending that all religions are of equal worth since they are only human constructions. He has adopted radical religious pluralism. (His experience, as I have learned it, almost exactly parallels the scenario that Carson describes as one of the dangers of the postmodern context; see *Gagging of God*, 36.) Hick and my classmate would probably smile knowingly, but it is only by the grace of God that we do not follow in their steps. These are matters of the greatest importance and few seminary students have been forced to grapple with them on a serious basis. It is much easier to take the pragmatic route and stay within the confines of our own tradition than it is to step out of those comfortable bounds and face the diverse approaches of other systems of thought. Some who do never return. I am not advocating that you deliberately set your convictions aside. I am suggesting that it is perhaps not wise to designate them as “convictions” if they have never been tested against alternatives. At the least you owe it to yourself to read widely in these areas so that you are not parochial in your outlook.

⁴⁰ John Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 375–76. For detailed critiques of Hick’s proposal, see Netland,

It is not reasonable, says Hick, to either ignore the religious experience of people from other faiths nor to assert that our own experience, in contrast to theirs, is veridical. All people are equally justified (in the technical, philosophical sense) in trusting their own religious experience. "Let us avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory with the single exception of the particular form enjoyed by the one who is speaking."⁴¹

The "Real" is Hick's designation of that to which theistic religions refer as "God," but so as not to exclude the nontheistic religions (such as Hinduism), the "Real" means both personal God as well as impersonal Absolute—there is no difference to Hick; there is only one such entity (at least in theory, though he acknowledges that this Real could in some sense be multiple). The Real can be apprehended by humans: "The 'presence' of the Real consists in the availability, from a transcendent source, of information that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience." But different peoples/cultures apprehend this Real in different ways, some as personal, others as impersonal. This reality is greater than either conception, but is truly known and experienced in both personal and impersonal ways. (He compares this to the physicists' description of light as both wave and particle.)⁴²

Each of these two basic categories, God and the Absolute, is schematised or made concrete within actual religious experience as a range of particular gods or absolutes. These are, respectively, the *personae* and the *impersonae* in terms of which the Real is humanly known. And the particularising factor ... is the range of human cultures, actualising different though overlapping aspects of our immensely complex human potentiality for awareness of the transcendent. It is in relation to different ways of being human, developed within the civilisations and cultures of the earth, that the Real, apprehended through the concept of God, is experienced specifically as the God of Israel, or as the Holy Trinity, or as Shiva, or as Allah, or as Vishnu ... And it is in relation to yet other forms of life that the Real,

Dissonant Voices, 198–233 and Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 29–100.

⁴¹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 244–45.

apprehended through the concept of the Absolute, is experienced as Brahman, or as Nirvana, or as Being, or as Sunyata ...⁴³

What then of the contradictory claims of each of the various religions? Hick has a multi-part response. Initially he proposes, in regard to historical issues, that this is no longer regarded as an issue by many people—presumably meaning that some are willing to set aside the law of noncontradiction, at least in the area of religion. But he realizes that this is not an option for everyone. So he classes the other conflicting statements into several groups, each with its own justification for allowing contradiction. Some of these conflicting truth claims are what he calls “trans-historical.” These are questions for which there is, theoretically, a true answer, but which cannot be tested empirically; they are not falsifiable. For example, did the universe have a beginning? These questions, he says, are “not soteriologically vital” and so can be ignored. They do not get in the way of our participating in the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.” The trans-historical issues are to be classed as mythological and thus not literally true. They are, however, “truthful in the sense that the dispositional responses which they tend to evoke are appropriate to our existence in relation to the Real.”⁴⁴

Primary affirmations, “the basic data apprehended by faith,” do not ultimately conflict between religions. They may conflict “in the sense that they are different and that one can only centre one’s religious life wholeheartedly and unambiguously upon one of them...; but not upon more than one at once.” But since they may reflect different, though equally legitimate ways “in which the same ultimate Reality has

⁴³ Ibid., 245. The second two ellipses are in the original text to suggest that the preceding list is only representative of many other possibilities.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 365–71.

impinged upon human life," they are both acceptable. "The truth or validity or authenticity of such manifestations lies in their soteriological effectiveness."⁴⁵

As a result of all this (and much more that has not been included here), Hick can conclude that "we have a number of historical totalities which ... may each mediate the Real to different groups of human beings; and which in fact do so, as far as we are able to judge, to about the same extent."⁴⁶

"Evangelical" Pluralism

As strange as it might seem, these ideas have even entered the world of evangelicalism. It is no longer uncommon to hear professing evangelicals rejecting logic and propositional truth.⁴⁷ Stanley Grenz, for example, says some helpful things and raises some concerns with which we should interact (particularly regarding the *purpose* of theology for the church), but he seems to have imbibed a substantial dose of postmodern flavoring. Even the wording of many of his arguments echoes the major postmodern thinkers. His rejection of propositional truth, his community-based view of revelation, and his elevation of tradition and culture to authoritative status are particularly disturbing. He contends that "ultimately, then, the propositions of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 372–73.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 375. Some forms of religious pluralism go beyond the positions summarized above. Beverly Lanzetta, for example, argues that "the divine nature is itself pluralistic, non-absolute, and continually giving birth to new traditions" (*The Other Side of Nothingness: Toward a Theology of Radical Openness* [Ithaca, NY: State Univ. of NY Press, 2001], as cited in publisher's brochure). At this point pluralism converges with process theology/philosophy. (The book is not yet published so I cannot be more specific.)

⁴⁷ In addition to those discussed here, other professing evangelicals who have drunk deeply from the wells of postmodernity include J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995) and B. Keith Putt, "Deconstructing the (Non)being of G⊗D: A Trinitarian Critique of Postmodern A/theology," Ph.D. diss., Rice Univ., 1995. (The nonstandard typography that is evident even in Putt's title is very typical of deconstructionists; it is even more so in the text of his writings. This reflects his thorough-going adoption of deconstructive methodology.) For a critique of these, see Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 103–48.

systematic theology find their *source* and aim in the identity and life of the community it serves” (emphasis added). This has an ongoing, revelatory nature:

Through the interaction of each succeeding generation with the biblical documents, the paradigmatic events and the early confrontation with these events become a continual source of revelation for the ongoing life of the community. Scripture is the foundational record of how the ancient faith community responded ... In this way the Bible stands as the informing and forming canon for the community throughout its history.

Note that Scripture forms only the foundation for a later corpus that also has the status of a *source* of theology:

The Bible provides the foundation for a corpus of basic Christian teaching that developed in the early church and has been transmitted from one generation of Christians to the next. The contemporary believing community continues in the tradition of those who give assent to this foundational doctrinal corpus. As a result, this body of beliefs likewise belongs to the faith of the church on which theology reflects.

This “body of beliefs” which “likewise belongs to the faith of the church” is one of the sources for theology according to Grenz:

The three ‘pillars’ or norms of theology form an ordered sequence of (1) the biblical message, (2) the theological heritage of the church and (3) the thought-forms of the historical-cultural context in which the contemporary people of God seek to speak, live and act.⁴⁸

Throughout this discussion Grenz takes particular pains to discredit a propositional view of revelation. The focus instead is on community and culture. The “truth” that we discover does not correspond directly with reality, but is a community-shaped understanding of it: “The ontological claims implicit in theological assertions arise as an outworking of the intent of the theologian to provide a model of reality, rather than to describe reality directly.” Or again, “By its very nature, the conceptual framework of a faith community claims to represent in some form the truth about the world and the divine reality its members have come to know and experience.” This sounds very postmodern—truth is a social construct and what one community has come to “know

⁴⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology*, 76, 77, 95, 93. There are disconcerting similarities here with the theological method of Roman Catholicism.

and experience” may differ from the knowledge and experience of another community.⁴⁹

Another evangelical scholar who shares the same outlook on truth is Alister McGrath. Although more cautious in some areas than Grenz, he also singles out Carl Henry as an illustration of what is wrong with traditional evangelicalism. His major criticism is that Henry affirms his belief that divine revelation is logically consistent. Henry even goes so far as to claim that “without noncontradiction and logical consistency, no knowledge whatever is possible.”⁵⁰ (These are supposed to be problems according to McGrath!) McGrath’s objection (“What logic is to be allowed this central role? Whose rationality provides the basis of scriptural authority?”⁵¹) seems to imply that there is more than one logic available in this world—an assertion that would warm the heart of any postmodernist. The result of following Henry on this point, says McGrath, is that we would inevitably allow “fallen human reason to judge God’s revelation.”⁵² But this is not so. To argue for logic and reason is simply to say that this is the minimum requirement for meaningful understanding of any sort, human or divine. Humanity’s rational capacity is the epistemological foundation of communication as designed and intended by God as a reflection of his own nature.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78, 79. Carl F. H. Henry’s massive, 6-volume defense of biblical revelation found in *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco, TX: Word, 1976–83) is Grenz’s primary foil; the heart of Grenz’s discussion of Henry is on pp. 67–69. For a positive assessment of Henry’s view of propositional truth in light of Grenz’s challenge, see Groothuis, *Truth Decay* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 112–31.

⁵⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:232; Henry’s most detailed response to modern challenges to the concept of propositional revelation is found in 3:429–81. McGrath, *Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) cites this statement on p. 170. Henry’s is by no means an unusual claim; indeed, orthodox Christianity (and Judaism before it) has assumed it from the beginning.

⁵¹ McGrath, *Passion for Truth*, 170.

⁵² Ibid., 171.

The statements by Henry which McGrath quotes are not passing statements, but are part of an extended discussion of the necessity of logical consistency as a test for truth in which Henry interacts with the many proposals for establishing truth that had been proposed at the time he wrote. Yet McGrath does not respond to any of these arguments. He simply says that “evangelicalism is free to avoid the false lure of foundationalism, and to maintain the integrity of divine revelation on its own terms and in its own categories.”⁵³ This is a dismissal by assertion, not logical argument (but perhaps that expects too much from someone who does not consider Christianity to be logically consistent). Henry would reply that without assuming logical consistency it is impossible even to challenge the claims of logic. Indeed, he says, renouncing “the importance of noncontradiction and logical consistency sponsors ... the suicide of theology.”⁵⁴ Yet this is exactly what Grenz and McGrath do in the name of “revisioning” evangelical theology in the context of—and I would suggest, under the influence of—postmodernity.

An even more drastic infusion of explicit postmodernity into evangelicalism is evident in both the title and contents of the article—in an IVP book on apologetics—“There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing Too” by Philip Kenneson.⁵⁵ Although the title is deliberately provocative, it well summarizes the thesis proposed by this professor of theology at an evangelical Christian college. Kenneson

⁵³ Ibid., 172.

⁵⁴ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:233. His extended discussion runs through p. 238; all of ch. 14 (pp. 225–44, subtitled: “The Role of Reason, Scripture, Consistency and Coherence”) is relevant as is much of his first volume which deals with theological method and epistemology. Although I have my (minor) disagreements with Henry at points, this is a substantive and valuable discussion that is far more biblical in its approach than that of Grenz and McGrath. Also note Schaeffer’s statement that “historic Christianity stands on a basis of antithesis. Without it historic Christianity is meaningless” (*The God Who Is There*, 15).

⁵⁵ Philip Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, 155–70 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

rejects totally any semblance of the correspondence view of truth (that something is true if it corresponds with the world as it really is). In its place he baptizes Rorty's postmodern, atheistic pragmatism: something is true if a given community finds it useful to believe it to be true. He evades the charge of relativism by asserting that only propositions can be true or false, and these exist only in social relationships. He has, he says, neither an epistemology nor a theory of truth. This new paradigm disposes of the need to wonder what is objectively true "because we are always in the grip of some belief. And this is the case even though what we certainly know may change if and when our beliefs change." As a matter of fact, "once we free ourselves from the strictures of epistemology, we can learn to brush aside questions like 'But how do you *know* what God wants of us?' in the same way we brush aside questions like 'But how do you *know* that Jones is worthy of your friendship?'"⁵⁶

One hardly knows where to start in response to such a radical proposal—especially one advanced as a Christian approach to truth. For one thing, Kenneson confuses sentences with propositions in his claim that only propositions can be true or false. All of his examples (e.g., "Jesus is Lord") refer to *sentences*. A proposition is not a sentence, but is technically the objective reality to which a sentence may refer.⁵⁷ The sentence, "God does not exist," is false because the situation to which it refers (the proposition that God exists) is different from what the sentence professes. Kenneson, if he was consistent, would have to say that the verity of the sentence would depend on the social

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 164, 165.

⁵⁷ See discussions of this in Gordon H. Clark, *Logic* (2d ed., Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 29–30; Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 113–15; Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 87–92; and *idem*, "Meaning," in *Encyclopedia of Empiricism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1997), 244–46. This distinction, of course, assumes the correspondence view of truth—but that, in part, demonstrates the linguistic relativism and redefinition necessary to advocate Rorty's (and Kenneson's) pragmatism. Truth is obliterated by stipulating new definitions of *truth* and *proposition*. (On the other hand, this may be a matter of terminology for other writers who use different terms, though the same meanings, for the items defined here as *sentence* and *proposition*.)

community which uses it. It would not be true for some if their community did not believe it. This denies the law of noncontradiction. It is not possible that something (in this case, the existence of God) can both exist and not exist at the same time. Believing something to be true or false has no bearing on whether or not it is, indeed, the actual nature of the case. "In divorcing sentences from objective realities, Kenneson's position defaults to linguistic relativism, whereby language cannot be connected to or verified by anything outside of language itself." And as to his claim that he has neither an epistemology nor a theory of truth, Groothuis rightly charges that "this posturing is impertinent." Everyone has both an epistemology and a theory of truth, even though most have never consciously articulated it. Kenneson *has* consciously chosen to adopt a particular epistemology and truth theory and denies it only in an attempt to duck the charge of relativism from his evangelical audience.⁵⁸ Despite Kenneson's claims to the contrary, we must remember that "Christianity is realistic because it says that if there is no truth, there is also no hope; and there can be no truth if there is no adequate base."⁵⁹

Groothuis provides a creative illustration of the result of attempting to wed postmodernity and evangelical hermeneutics. Imagine, he suggests, the apostle Paul on Mars Hill (Acts 17), arguing as an evangelical postmodernist:

People of Postmodernity, I can see you speak in many language games and are interested in diverse spiritualities. I have observed your pluralistic religious discourse and the fact that you use many final vocabularies. I have seen your celebration of the death of

⁵⁸ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 147, 148; see the fuller critique of Kenneson's postmodern theory of truth on pp. 145–52. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. suggests that Kenneson's "defense against the charge [of relativism] is worthy of Alice in Wonderland" ("'Evangelical': What's In A Name?" *Southern Seminary: News and Events*, Dec. 1997, available at: <<http://www.sbts.edu/news/ssmag/dec97/whatname.html>>, accessed 1/18/01). Another resource (which I have not seen) that may also provide a helpful critique of Kenneson's position is John Castelein, "Can the Restoration Movement Plea Survive If Belief in Objective Truth is Abandoned?" *Stone-Campbell Journal* 3.1 (Spring 1998). There is a reply by Kenneson in the same issue. This may be part of an ongoing internal denominational dispute since I have also found references to similar discussions in earlier issues of this Church of Christ journal. I do not have page references to these articles.

⁵⁹ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 46.

objective truth and the eclipse of metanarratives, and I declare to you that you are right. As one of your own has said, “We are suspicious of all metanarratives.” What you have already said, I will reaffirm to you with a slightly different spin.

We have left modernity behind as a bad dream. We deny its rationalism, objectivism and intellectual arrogance. Instead of this, we affirm the Christian community, which professes that God is the strand that unites our web of belief. We have our own manner of interpreting the world and using language that we call you to adopt for yourself. We give you no argument for the existence of God, since natural theology is simply rationalistic hubris. We are not interested in metaphysics but in discipleship.

For us, Jesus is Lord. That is how we speak. We act that way, too; it’s our own communal beliefs and tradition, we believe that God is in control of our narrative. We ask you to join in our language game. Please. Since it is impossible to give you any independent evidence for our use of language, or to appeal to hard facts, we simply declare this to be our truth. It can become your truth as well, if you join up. Jesus does not call you to believe propositions but to follow him. You really can’t understand what we’re talking about until you join up. But after that, it will be much clearer. Trust us. In our way of speaking, God is calling everyone everywhere to change his or her language game, to appropriate a new discourse and to redescribe reality one more time. We speak such that the resurrection of Jesus is the crucial item in our final vocabulary. We hope you will learn to speak this well, as well.⁶⁰

Problems with Pluralism

When critiquing pluralism it is important to keep in mind that one has (at least) two distinct audiences. If my only concern were to communicate to seminary students (at least those at this seminary), all I would have to do is to define and illustrate pluralism and follow it up with a few proof texts (probably John 14:6 and Acts 4:12)—and you would probably all agree with me.⁶¹ That, however, would quite likely be due primarily to your preconceptions and ecclesiastical environment. After all, pluralism is radically different than—indeed, the polar opposite of—traditional orthodoxy. Since it is increasingly likely that you will have opportunity to cross paths (and perhaps verbal swords!) with radical pluralists and those influenced by them (e.g., young people in

⁶⁰ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 161–62.

⁶¹ This is certainly not to suggest that the use of proof texts is a valid way to establish a theological position any more than the stringing together of isolated texts in the pulpit constitutes biblical preaching! It merely suggests that we are too often content with superficial critiques of positions that are so radically different from our traditional assumptions that we have difficulty conceiving how they might be defensible.

your future ministries who will go off to the university), we also need to pay attention to addressing such issues in their own terms. This does not mean that we must abandon our biblical foundation for that is our essential epistemological *pou sto*.⁶² It does mean that we must be prepared, if necessary, to “take the roof off” an opposing system of [un]belief.⁶³ We argue, as it were, on a hypothetical basis, explicitly using the unbeliever’s world view: “If I held your presuppositions, these are the problems that I would face—and they are insurmountable; it is not possible to live consistently on that basis. Now, look at the same issue from a biblical point of view. The Bible has the only satisfactory solution—but you must look at it from a biblical worldview.”⁶⁴ This section of the paper is designed to suggest (though not to develop extensively) some of the

⁶² *Pou sto* means “place to stand.” Everyone must start somewhere; no one begins from nowhere or from a neutral base. To be consistent, a Christian must begin by assuming the Bible to be the authoritative, revelatory *pou sto*. By contrast, the unbeliever begins as assuming the sufficiency and autonomy of human reason to discover truth. He thus sets himself up as the judge of God and God’s Word—a role which he has no right to arrogate to himself.

⁶³ This is Francis Schaeffer’s term; Erickson also adopts it in his proposal for responding to postmodernity (*Postmodernizing the Faith*, 156–57). Van Til calls it “arguing from the impossibility of the contrary” or as “removing the foundation of the unbeliever’s argument.” Technically, it is known as the transcendental method. In one sentence, “unless you believe in God you can logically believe in nothing else.” (This is from the concluding paragraph of Van Til’s *Why I Believe in God*; it is available in several places including Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998], 143). See the references in the following note.

⁶⁴ This is my paraphrase of the presuppositional methodology advocated by Van Til, Bahnsen, Pratt, Thomas, et al., and in slightly nuanced forms by Frame and Schaeffer. See representative discussions in Richard L. Pratt Jr., *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 81–97 (this is perhaps the best, simplest summary of the point at hand); Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, edited by R. Booth (Atlanta: American Vision, and Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996), 55–80; Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 4–7, 22–23, 106–20, and esp. 482–529 (this last section is the most technical; the book includes extended readings from Van Til’s own writings); John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994); and Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 126–30. I note with interest Carson’s comment regarding apologetic methodology in a postmodern context that “as long as the modernist model of truth based on proper foundations and appropriate evidence and reason prevailed, a narrowly evidentialist approach (whether wise or unwise) was possible. It no longer is” (*Gagging of God*, 186).

relevant issues in this regard. The next sections will turn to a more direct theological and biblical perspective.⁶⁵

Absolutes and the Laws of Logic

One of the most devastating critiques of pluralism is that it is self-defeating.⁶⁶ The only absolute truth in pluralism is that there is no truth. But if that is so, then pluralism is not true either. As Nicole points out, if there is no distinction between right and wrong, no absolutes, then “this would mean there is no meaning to language, and even those who would rejoice in that could find no appropriate word to express their feeling!”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ In addition to the issues raised here the entire issue of pluralism spills over very directly into the realm of cyberspace and a responsible, Christian view and use of that medium. I have addressed some of these additional issues in a previous article, “Communicating the Text in the Postmodern Ethos of Cyberspace: Cautions Regarding the Technology and the Text,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 5 (2000): 45–70; an earlier draft is available at <<http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/commtext.pdf>>. As indicative of the link between these two issues (which is often ignored), consider the comments of Douglas Groothuis in *The Soul in Cyberspace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997; reprint, Wipf & Stock, 1999), 119: “[Technopagans] have, in good postmodern fashion, abandoned the classical conception of truth and are simply playing with various contortions of consciousness.” This “frees them from the tyranny of objective reality, meaning and logic. Cyberians ‘have abandoned organized rules of logic in favor of reality hacking...,’ viewing life as a game to [be] played according to one’s own rules.... The arbitrarily arranged rules of the computer game serve as a model of the universe at large. You make it up as you go along.” He adds, “Reality hacking and the desire for a designer reality spun out of one’s own head ... rule out the notion of any fixed, final, and authoritative conception of reality.... There is ‘no such thing as non-fiction, only points of view.’” The problem with this approach, is, as Groothuis points out, that “reality-hacking without belief in a Reality that can be reached hollows out any claim of possessing a coherent worldview intellectually superior to any other worldview; it leaves only the rattling shells of arbitrary assertions.”

⁶⁶ “Any statement of relativism, whether grounded in culture, linguistics, or hermeneutics, is fundamentally self-destructive” (Carson, *Gagging of God*, 176).

⁶⁷ Roger Nicole, “The Biblical Concept of Truth,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, 287–98 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 287. He goes on to say that “the same predicament applies to all who deny that, or even question whether, there is objective validity in verbal statements: They presuppose such validity at least for their denial (or question)!” He also quotes Charles Malik: “They tell you, there is no truth; it is all a matter of impression, or at best probability and statistics.... This is all false. If taken absolutely, then there is something absolute, namely, that there is no truth” (287–88).

The social impact of pluralism, seen, for example, in the need for being “politically correct” these days, is couched in terms of tolerance. But pluralism’s “plea for tolerance is so imperial that it is remarkably intolerant.”⁶⁸ It is not possible to be a thorough-going pluralist/relativist and purport that there are no absolute truths and then insist that someone else is wrong if they assert that there *is* absolute truth and that pluralism is wrong. Theories with such basic flaws are fundamentally wrong headed.

The laws of logic, though frequently ridiculed, are the absolute bedrock of any social intercourse and human communication. Even those who contend that we have been freed from the tyranny of “western logic” must assume it in order to communicate their contention. These “laws” are not the invention of Aristotle, though he was perhaps the first to formulate them in a formal way. Rather, the laws of logic are statements of the way rationality and cognition operate for all people at all times.⁶⁹ The law of noncontradiction, the law of excluded middle, the law of identity, etc. are what they are because they are part of a reasonable, consistent universe created by a personal God in such a way that sentient creatures who are part of it are, by nature, reflectors of his image. Although perhaps not limited to this, at least one major component of what it means to be God’s image bearers is rationality: the ability to reason abstractly and to communicate our thoughts to our fellows in a cognitive, propositional manner.⁷⁰

Violation of any of the laws of logic destroys communication. Either what I say is as I say it is or it is not; it is either A or non-A; it is not both in the same way at the same time. Either there is a personal God or there is not. It cannot be true that there both is a

⁶⁸ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 134.

⁶⁹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 145–46. He notes that “the principle [of noncontradiction] is irrefutable since any attempt at refutation necessarily makes appeal to the principle itself” (146).

⁷⁰ For introductory discussions of the laws of logic see: Gordon H. Clark, *Logic*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1988) or A. J. Hoover, *Don’t You Believe It! Poking Holes in Faulty Logic* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982). For a good summary of the image of God as it relates to rationality and language, see Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 65–66.

personal God and is not a personal God. Christianity affirms that there is a personal God. Hinduism denies it. Two contradictory assertions cannot both be true; either one or both must be false.

Strictly speaking, contradiction is the affirmation and denial of the same meaning. The price of rejecting the principle of noncontradiction is forfeiture of the possibility of meaningful affirmation about anything at all—including any statement about the religious ultimate. One who abandons the principle of noncontradiction is reduced to utter silence, for he or she has rejected a necessary condition for the coherent and meaningful statement of any position whatsoever.⁷¹

Living with Pluralism

It is impossible to live and think consistently and logically on the basis of postmodernity's presuppositions. In practice, postmodernity must borrow the Christian world view to survive in God's world.⁷² "To be postmodern in the structural sense is as yet inconceivable."⁷³ Even the postmodernists are forced to admit this; they must believe one thing in theory (pluralism, no truth) and another in practice. Note Anderson's gleeful twist on this:

Most of us in the Western world slip and slide around in the territory between objectivist and constructivist camps, without much of a clear idea of what we think about such matters. Our everyday experience tends to be objectivist, guided by what the philosophers call "naive realism": we generally assume that the universe is the way we experience it. But if asked to think about it, we turn into constructivists. Sure, we say, it's all relative; time and space and identity are subjective ideas—everybody knows that.

⁷¹ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 145. Netland's discussion of this, especially as it applies to the claim that religious truth is not subject to the laws of logic even though other subject matter is so subject, is essential reading (141–50).

⁷² Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 126, see also 73–74. Erickson echoes this critique when he refers to "the impossibility of living consistently with a thoroughly radical postmodern view" (*Postmodernizing the Faith*, 156).

⁷³ Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 27. "Structural" in this sense refers to the organizing and governing force of society. Guinness' point is that although modernity may be past in its philosophical sense and postmodernity is the now-reigning king, it does not yet govern everyday life, despite its increasing encroachment in that arena.

Well, yes, probably everybody does know that. But we don't all know we know it. *We haven't yet quite figured out how to live with what we know*, and we don't know what a curious piece of knowledge it is—part jewel, part bombshell.⁷⁴

In other words, postmodernism can not offer a complete, consistent worldview—and some of them (such as Anderson) seem proud of the fact. But we must ask, what kind of answer is that? Should we be content to live in such an intellectual schizophrenia?

Nor is this just a theoretical problem. Schaeffer recounts the dilemma of an early relativist. John Cage was a musician who sought to express his world view through his music. Since his worldview was one without absolutes, only blind chance in an impersonal universe, he deliberately composed his music that way. Initially he composed, note by note, by tossing a coin. Later he devised a mechanical device that generated the randomness that he desired. The sort of noise and confusion, punctuated with silence, that resulted you can well imagine. Although he attempted to be consistent with his world view in his music, he discovered that he could not live on that basis. He lived in an area where a great many and a great diversity of mushrooms grew. He was fascinated by them and began studying mycology, becoming one of the best amateurs in the field. He owned one of the largest private collections of books on the subject ever compiled. He soon realized that his worldview and his musical style would not work in mycology. "I became aware that if I approached mushrooms in the spirit of my chance operations, I would die shortly, so I decided that I would not approach them in this way!" As Schaeffer goes on to explain,

here is a man who is trying to teach the world what the universe intrinsically is and what the real philosophy of life is, and yet he cannot even apply it to picking mushrooms. If he were to go out into the woods and begin picking mushrooms by chance, within a couple of days there would be no more Cage!

... [Relativists] cannot live on the basis of a consistent application of their views in regard to the universe.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be*, xii, emphasis added.

⁷⁵ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 74; the preceding summary comes from 70–74.

The postmodernist faces the same problem with language. Postmodernists, especially the deconstructionist variety, assert that meaning is not objective, that the author's intention does not control the interpretation of the text. Yet they are very offended when *their own writings* are "misunderstood"! Derridá is a case in point. His philosophy was the object of a critique by philosopher John Searle—an 11-page article in *Glyph*. Derridá was so disturbed that Searle misunderstood him that he wrote a 93-page reply in which he, among other things, accuses Searle of not taking various factors into account, of "serious negligence," of being confused, of settling "for the shortest, most facile analysis," of being mistaken, even of missing explicit verbal signals in the text as to his meaning!⁷⁶ Such inconsistency invalidates the deconstructionists' arguments and casts serious doubts on postmodernity as a whole.

Issues of social ethics also need to be considered. How is society to function if all truth is relative? What will provide the basis for people to live together in any sort of harmony? There are no absolutes, no intrinsic standards of right and wrong. One possible answer is that societies arbitrarily construct their own reality and their own value systems. But why? On what basis? What compels one person to accept another's construct? If someone in that society prefers a different standard, on what basis is conformity to be imposed? How can the major moral issues of our own experience be adjudicated? What answer does this system have for, say, Hitler's holocaust? Here even "social construct" will not work, for German society accepted genocide as "good." One cannot appeal to the broader European or western culture, for there is no basis on

⁷⁶ The original article by Derridá, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph* 1 (1977), was followed by Searle's critique, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derridá," *Glyph* 2 (1977): 198–208, to which Derridá replied in "Limited, Inc., abc," *Glyph* 2 (1977): 162–254. Derridá's two articles were reprinted in book form as *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1988). The references in the text above come from the book: 37, 46, 48–49, 51, 49, 50, 52 (and these only sample the first 20 pages of the article; it is tedious reading). Erickson also refers to this exchange and cites several other examples of similar protests by deconstructionist writers (*Postmodernizing the Faith*, 156).

which any other culture's values can be imposed on another. Nor can appeal be made to the fact that Hitler's Germany was part of western culture and its actions violated the social conventions of the larger society, for there is no valid reason why the Germans were not free to develop their own construction of reality in which the super race was free to exterminate non-Germanic weaklings.

Rorty accepts, on the basis of his pluralistic pragmatism, an acceptance of basic Judeo-Christian values since that seems to work for the (American) culture in which he lives. He acknowledges that in doing so he is an "atheistic freeloader"—living on borrowed capital, adopting (a subset of) God's worldview for limited purposes of social interaction, all the while advocating relativism. As Groothuis points out, "Rorty's agreement with a Christian conscience on this point is intrinsically whimsical, haphazard, arbitrary and contingent."⁷⁷ Such a move points to the bankruptcy of the philosophical underpinnings of his worldview. "The reality of Rorty's humanity (made in God's image with a conscience that recognizes moral value) pulls him in the right direction, while the logic of his postmodernism pulls him into the abyss. This tension is inescapable for such a position."⁷⁸

Nature of Truth

A variety of definitions of truth have been proposed, distinguished in large part by whether or not one thinks that "reality exists independently of the mind and that reality is what it is regardless of how we think about it."⁷⁹ The postmodernist definitions all pose significant theological problems.

⁷⁷ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 189.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 191. Groothuis considers the social and moral dilemma of postmodernity at length on pp. 187–210.

⁷⁹ Mortimer Adler, *Truth in Religion*, 21. Philosophically, this position is known as realism. It is quite likely that this seems self-evident to you (it does to most people), but there are those who would argue otherwise, especially (though not exclusively) in postmodernity. Adler goes

One alternative proposed by some postmodernists⁸⁰ is the *coherence view* which states that a system of thought is true if it coheres and contains no internal contradictions. This enables them to accept multiple, contradictory systems of thought as equally true. While a system must be internally coherent in order to be true (i.e., coherence is a necessary condition), that is not a sufficient condition in that it may not correspond to how things really are and it may also contradict other coherent systems (thus violating the law of noncontradiction).⁸¹

Another alternative definition of truth is the *conventional view* in which truth is simply what a given group of people decide to accept as true, either as a convenient means of social interchange or as a functional means of power (thus Foucault). This may describe how some societies operate (i.e., it may be an accurate sociological observation), but it does not determine truth. It also raises the problem of multiple, contradictory truths as well as fails to correspond to how things really are—which would be a necessary component of any definition of truth even if that were not the basis on which truth were to be determined.⁸²

Postmodern *neo-pragmatism* is another proposal for defining truth (e.g., Rorty). Truth is what gets things done. Instead of some absolute truth, situations are “re-described” in new terms in hopes of getting something done and gaining acceptance of more people. The key is arbitrary vocabularies, not objective propositions. There is no necessary relationship of the selected words to reality. But this is manipulation and propaganda, not logical argument in favor of truth. It may “work,” but it provides no motivation, no basis for preference—there is no sufficient reason to believe or to change one’s belief.

on to explain that “only in the context of characteristically modern idealistic philosophies is truth defined in terms other than correspondence with reality” (22).

⁸⁰ Other postmodernists reject this view as “logocentric” (essentially a swear word in postmodernity!) and therefore a hangover from modernity.

⁸¹ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 97–98.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 98–104.

The pragmatists have confused the results of what people may believe (whether true or false) with what is true.⁸³

By contrast, a *correspondence view* of truth argues that, “the definition of truth is the agreement of thought with reality. What makes a descriptive proposition true is that it corresponds to the way things really are.”⁸⁴ This is the historic view of Christian orthodoxy as well as most evangelical scholars.⁸⁵ Groothuis provides a helpful discussion of the biblical concept of truth as correspondence with reality and lists the following distinctives of such a view.

1. Truth is revealed by God.
2. Objective truth exists and is knowable.
3. Christian truth is absolute in nature.
4. Truth is universal.
5. The truth of God is eternally engaging and momentous, not trendy or superficial.
6. Truth is exclusive, specific and antithetical.
7. Truth, Christianly understood, is systematic and unified.
8. Christian truth is an end, not a means to any other end.⁸⁶

Unity of Truth

It is also important to affirm the unity of truth. That is, there is only one truth; there are not two truths, one religious and one empirical/rational. Though some try to “rescue” truth in religion from contradiction with the empirical realm by positing two “compartments” for truth, this is an illegitimate move. We must affirm not only that all truth is God’s truth, but that God’s truth is singular, comprehensive, and coherent.⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid., 104–06.

⁸⁴ Adler, *Truth in Religion*, 21.

⁸⁵ For a study of truth in twentieth-century evangelicalism, see James Emery White, *What Is Truth? A Comparative Study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

⁸⁶ Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 65–81.

⁸⁷ This is the controversy that existed between Aquinas (who argued for a singular truth) and the “Averroists” in the 13th C. For a summary of this issue and the historical precedents, see Adler, *Truth in Religion*, 24–27.

Mathematical truth is a part of that whole; so is the truth of all the various empirical sciences; so also is the truth achieved by historical research and by philosophical thought; and finally, if religious truth is not poetical truth of the kind to be found in myths and other forms of fictional narrative, then it, too, is simply one part in the whole of truth that must have coherence and be compatible with all the other parts of the whole. That, briefly stated, is what is required by the logic of truth in terms of the unity of truth.⁸⁸

The basis for such a claim rests on the biblical view of God as the supreme, sovereign Creator of the universe. Apart from him, there can be no truth for there is no standard.

This does not mean that truth is proved or demonstrated in the same way for all areas of knowledge. Material facts (e.g., specific gravity) are examined in an empirical way; nonmaterial facts (e.g., the laws of logic and the existence of God) may not be so tested—but that makes them no less true. Nor does this mean that we always have a correct interpretation of the facts in any given area. There is a difference between truth and our apprehension of the truth.⁸⁹ Truth is always true whether understood, known, believed, or not. (This assumes, of course, a realist view of the universe.) There may, at times, be items believed to be true (e.g., the atom is the smallest unit of matter and is indivisible), but which are later learned to be, in fact, untrue.

It is also possible that assertions in different areas of knowledge may appear to conflict. In this case, the only possible conclusions are that either one of the assertions is wrong or that both are wrong. This is often alleged to be the case with science and the Bible. Here we can learn something of value from Augustine. As Adler summarized his thought, Augustine's first principle was that we should "hold to the truth of Scripture without wavering. Since it is the revealed truth, we must never abandon our belief in its

⁸⁸ Ibid., 27. Or to put it slightly differently, Adler later summarizes: "In the realm of all truths consisting of propositions that can be affirmed or denied, incompatible truths cannot coexist. All the diverse parts of knowledge, including religious knowledge or knowledge by faith, must coherently form one and only one integral whole" (32).

⁸⁹ "Claiming to know him who is omniscient is not the same as being omniscient. Even if we claim that God's self-disclosure is reliable, and if we articulate a sophisticated doctrine of truthfulness of Scripture, that does not mean that our doctrine is entirely and absolutely truthful" (Carson, *Gagging of God*, 132).

truth.” To that he added a second principle: “Since Sacred Scripture can be interpreted in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular version only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it if it should prove to be false, lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of nonbelievers and obstacles be placed in the way of their believing.”⁹⁰ This is helpful so long as we remember that this does not mean that other areas of knowledge have greater authority or truth value than Scripture. It also points out the importance of the unity of truth. We may not have a correct grasp of the facts in *either area* (e.g., science or the Bible); our interpretation of the data of science may be wrong (atoms are divisible), or our interpretation of Scripture may be wrong (theologians once argued for the earth as the center of the solar system). But if both are understood correctly, a single, coherent truth that corresponds to reality will be evident.⁹¹

This unity of the truth has considerable significance for the discussion of plurality in religion. Although not arguing as a believer,⁹² Adler proposes what I consider to be a weighty argument *against* a pluralistic view of truth and therefore of religion. His lengthy summary is worth quoting in full.

If Averroistic dualism is to be discredited in the Far East as it is in the West or, in other words, if the unity of truth is affirmed;
If the Western rules of thought with regard to incompatible views are sound because the reality with which the truth corresponds does not contain contradictions at its very core;
If this logic of truth must be accepted in the Far East as well as in the West because of the employment of Western technology in the Far East;
Then, should not Western natural or philosophical theology have a direct bearing on the claims to truth on the part of some or all of the Far Eastern religions?

⁹⁰ Ibid., 29. Unfortunately, Adler does not document the specific passage(s) from Augustine to which he refers and I have not had time to identify it myself. (It might be from his essay “The Profit of Believing” to which Adler refers later.)

⁹¹ For helpful discussions of these matters, see not only Adler (cited above), but also Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 83–110 and Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 141–50.

⁹² Adler explicitly affirms that he writes “as a philosopher and not as a communicant of one of the world’s great religions” (*Truth in Religion*, x), though he does write as a theist (107).

A bit later, speaking about the “nontheistic cosmological religions of the Far East, Adler goes on to argue that

if what these religions believe about reality and the cosmos is incompatible with the truths about the cosmos that are integral to technology and its underlying natural science, then on these points their articles of religious faith, those which make contrary factual assertions about reality and the cosmos, cannot be true.⁹³

Reality of Divine Revelation

Any discussion of pluralism must address the question of God. As Christians, we assume the existence of God (a presupposition without which, I would argue, it is impossible to prove anything). If that is a valid assumption, then the existence of a personal, sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient, creator God provides an epistemological framework for understanding all elements of the debate—indeed, of an entire worldview. Unless this God is a deistic deity, however, we must also assume that he both can and does communicate with his creation in a way that finite created beings can understand. This does not mean that God communicates all that he knows, but that which he communicates is true knowledge, albeit partial. Persons (who are finite) may misunderstand God’s revelation at times, but they can have true knowledge. The locus of this revelation is thus an important question. Historically, orthodox Christianity has accepted the Bible as coextensive with God’s verbal revelation. If that is correct (and it certainly cannot be argued in detail here), then there exists an authoritative, “privileged” source which we, as dependent creatures, *must study* if we hope to have true knowledge of God and our (better, God’s!) world. It is the *text* of Scripture that is of

⁹³ Ibid., 76–77, 77. He develops the argument at some length in ch. 4 (69–92). Averroes was a 12th C. Islamic philosopher who argued that religious instruction (i.e., revelation from Koran or Bible) could contradict reasoned (i.e., philosophical) truth. His “double-truth theory” concluded that philosophical truth was the higher truth and when it conflicted with revealed truth the latter was to be interpreted symbolically (J. Van Engen, “Averroes,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 107–08).

penultimate importance as our only reliable means of acquiring ultimate knowledge: the knowledge of God himself.⁹⁴

The really important thing is to know him, to be reconciled to him. Although this involves rational thought, more than rational thought is involved. God is more interested in eliciting from us trust, obedience, holiness, delight in his presence, humility of heart, than *merely* formal understanding (though he certainly wants that from us as well).⁹⁵

Such a position has faced substantial opposition from both modernity and (especially) from postmodernity. This is most clearly seen in the repeated rejection of propositional truth. Much of the immediate impetus for the modern denial of propositional truth in the religious realm may be traced to the influence of existentialism as mediated to 20th century theology through the dialectical approach of neo-orthodoxy.⁹⁶ Schaeffer explains that Kierkegaard (the 19th century father of existentialism) “teaches that that which would give meaning is always separated from reason; reason only leads to knowledge downstairs, which is mathematical knowledge without any meaning, but upstairs you hope to find a non-rational meaning for the particulars.”⁹⁷ Neo-orthodoxy picks up this theme in claiming that revelation is not a cognitive, proposition-containing event, but an existential “encounter” with God that has no parallel or analogy in realms of knowledge outside religion.⁹⁸ Revelation belongs

⁹⁴ Carson, *Gagging of God*, 130–32; see also his extended discussion of the authority of Scripture on pp. 141–91.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁹⁶ Kant’s metaphysical skepticism is also relevant at this point; his thought is similar to Kierkegaard’s in that both denied the possibility of metaphysical knowledge on the basis of reason. John Frame’s discussion of Van Til’s analysis of Kant and Barth may be helpful at this point: *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 356–69 and the cross references in n. 12 on p. 357.

⁹⁷ Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 46. Schaeffer’s “upstairs” and “downstairs” refers to the metaphysical realm and the physical world, respectively. The early Wittgenstein’s existentialism as well as his later linguistic philosophy (or linguistic analysis: words only refer to other words, not to any “real” objects in the world) has also been influential at this point (see *ibid.*, 51–55).

⁹⁸ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 115–16.

“upstairs”; propositions can only exist “downstairs.” As Barth puts it, “revelation ... takes place as an *event*, when and where the word of the Bible *becomes* God’s Word.... Where the Word of God is an *event*, revelation and the Bible are one in fact.”⁹⁹ Or in Brunner’s words, “revelation is certainly not a ‘Something’, a ‘thing’; but it is a process, an event, and indeed an event which happens to us and in us.”¹⁰⁰ Revelation, then, cannot possibly be verbal/propositional, for it relates to upper-story matters, i.e., metaphysics, and reason has no right to transgress into those realms.

Propositional revelation/truth is often caricatured. The pluralists—including the increasing number of evangelicals who mock it—often set up a straw man which burns brightly. “Propositional truth,” they say, “means that God has given a list of doctrinal statements. But look! Most of the Bible is historical narrative, not statements of doctrine.” That is not, however, what propositional revelation entails. When we speak of propositional revelation we simply mean that God’s revelation has been given in verbal, linguistic form that communicates specific, objective content that is true.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, v. 1 pt. 1 of *Church Dogmatics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 127, emphasis added. He later rejects a view of the Bible as propositional revelation, arguing instead that revelation is personal: “God’s Word is not a thing to be described, nor is it a concept to be defined. It is neither a content nor an idea. It is not ‘a truth,’ not even the very highest truth. It is the truth because it is God’s person speaking, *Dei loquentis persona*. It is not something objective” (155). The doctrine of Scripture of “later Old-Protestantism”—that the Bible is “a fixed total of revealed propositions” is “radically impossible” (156; see also 160–61).

¹⁰⁰ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, v. 1 (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 19. He goes on to explain that “the Word which has been formulated in human speech [i.e., the Bible] is now only revelation in an indirect sense; it is revelation as witness to Him” (27). He explicitly rejects the view of “orthodoxy” that the Bible is verbally inspired—a “sterile intellectualism” with “disastrous results” (28; see also 32–34).

¹⁰¹ For comprehensive discussions of the doctrine of propositional revelation, see Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:429–81; Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 43–54; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 3–23; Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, esp. 61–67, 91–97, though 37–59 is exceedingly helpful background; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture’s Diverse Literary Forms,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, 53–104 (Grand Rapids:

This is in contrast to saying that God has revealed himself in history—meaning that divine revelation comes through those events in which God intervenes in our world—or that revelation is personal. The popular concept of personal revelation views revelation as a subjective, existential encounter that cannot adequately be expressed with “mere” words—it can only be experienced, not verbalized or shared with another.¹⁰² An appeal to personal revelation is very common among religious pluralists and is also characteristic of those evangelicals who have imbibed postmodernism. This is essentially the same emphasis as the neo-orthodox view of revelation as event—as existential encounter, noted earlier. Netland summarizes this concept well as it is often found in contemporary pluralist literature:

The locus of truth is not propositions, statements, or beliefs, but rather is in persons. Religious truth does not reflect correspondence with reality so much as it signifies integrity, sincerity, faithfulness, authenticity of life, and existentially appropriating certain beliefs in one’s life and conduct...

Truth is not a static property of propositions or doctrines but rather a dynamic product of human involvement with what is said to be true.¹⁰³

One of the problems with a definition of revelation that is only personal is that “personal encounter cannot take place in a cognitive vacuum.”¹⁰⁴

One cannot respond appropriately to God without first having some knowledge of God. The believer can only respond personally to God as Lord and Savior if he or she already knows something about what God is like and what he expects from humankind.¹⁰⁵

This also raises the issue of faith which many pluralists view as a subjective attitude devoid of specific content. Biblically, there cannot be “faith” in the abstract; it requires

Zondervan, 1986), esp. 56–67 (though factor in here the criticisms of Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 345 n. 85).

¹⁰² See Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 92–97. Although the truth of Scripture is not necessarily limited to propositional truth, it certainly includes it (Carson, *Gagging of God*, 163; for a discussion of other, non-propositional elements in Scripture, see 163–67).

¹⁰³ *Dissonant Voices*, 118–19. Netland is here summarizing the views of Hick and W. C. Smith, not advocating his own view.

¹⁰⁴ Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, 46–47.

¹⁰⁵ Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 126.

an object. To be valid, effective faith, it must have a worthy object. If that is so, then knowledge must precede faith and faith must be based on historical, objective truth, not an irrational, existential “leap of faith.”¹⁰⁶ Since we have no other way of gaining the necessary information about the transcendent God, God has graciously taken the initiative to supply it, thus demonstrating that he is not only transcendent but also immanent.

To contend for propositional revelation is not to deny that God reveals himself through natural revelation or the events of history. It merely asserts that what we sometimes call special revelation carries specific, objective, inerrant, semantic content that is true knowledge even if it is not exhaustive knowledge. Other forms of revelation are subjective and subject to fallible apprehension.¹⁰⁷

Every denial of the possibility of a literally true verbal revelation from God to mankind strikes directly at Jesus Christ in his role as Prophet and Teacher, for he claimed to be the deliverer of just such a revelation. And those who would be loyal to him must be willing to affirm not only that God can and has revealed himself but also that he has done so in propositional fashion—and in inscripturated fashion at the point of the Christian Scriptures.

Christians must make this propositional or informational revelation the *bedrock* of their faith, for it is only as they believe truth originating from God himself that they can have certainty respecting the validity of their religious convictions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 141–43. Carson (*Gagging of God*, 173–74) interacts with Wilfrid Cantwell Smith on this point; Smith distinguishes *belief* (objective, propositional knowledge with a specific object) from *faith* (an attitude with no object) with the goal of allowing multiple expressions of faith in divergent cultures and religions, all of which are valid. As Carson points out, this is not much more than a “twentieth-century warmed-over Buddhist notion of faith.” On these distinctions see also Netland, *Dissonant Voices*, 127–31. On the biblical understanding of faith, see J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?* (Macmillan, 1925; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946) and Gordon H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983).

¹⁰⁷ Special revelation (and/or propositional revelation) must also be interpreted by fallible recipients, but in this case there is specific content that can be evaluated and discussed. This is quite different from attempting to discern the content of, say, the Exodus apart from God’s revelatory interpretation of that historical event, or of Dr. Whoever’s existential “encounter” with The Real that he cannot express in words.

¹⁰⁸ Reymond, *Systematic Theology*, 23.

Implications for Soteriology

Universalism in one form or another is the logical result of denying absolute truth. As Schaeffer puts it, “there is no personal antithesis at the point of justification.” This is the necessary result of the pluralist’s premise. “They have no final antithesis between right and wrong, therefore there can be no such thing as moral guilt; therefore justification as a radically changed relationship with God can have no meaning; therefore no one is finally condemned.”¹⁰⁹ Schaeffer is here talking about neo-orthodoxy, but that is only an earlier form of postmodernity in religion. It is by rejecting any standard of absolute truth and opting for some form philosophical pluralism that many have moved into soteriological inclusivism, religious pluralism, or universalism.¹¹⁰ Once antithesis is denied, there are inevitable consequences in both theology and philosophy.¹¹¹

Pattern for Proclamation

When it comes down to the “so what?” of this topic, it might be helpful to observe the impact of pluralism on local church ministries including preaching, worship, and evangelism. This section is merely suggestive; it makes no attempt to be comprehensive. Hopefully it will stimulate some interest in thinking about the implications of ministry in the opening years of the 21st century. I have included a mix of observations both as to how pluralism impacts ministry and some specific suggestions about doing ministry that will maintain biblical integrity in such a context. I begin with a list of reminders

¹⁰⁹ *The God Who Is There*, 102, 103.

¹¹⁰ Dr. King’s paper next month will pursue this line of thought in greater detail.

¹¹¹ At this point it would be exceedingly helpful to engage in a comprehensive examination of the biblical text in response to the preceding description of pluralism and in anticipation of the following concluding remarks about ministering in this context. Unfortunately, neither time nor space permit such an excursion—which, in any case, I could not write until I had first grappled with the issues of pluralism. Now that I have some idea of what it is that needs to be addressed I can more profitably turn to the text in this regard. But given the fact that this is intended to be an essay (albeit a long one!) not a book, that will have to wait for another time. For some direction in this regard I refer you to Carson, *Gagging of God*, 193–245, 253–314 (esp. his discussion of key texts in the inclusivist/exclusivist debate on 300–13), and 496–501.

offered by D. A. Carson that will serve to summarize a number of items discussed above and to transition to the subsequent considerations regarding ministry.¹¹²

1. It is vital to remember that the challenges of pluralism are not new (42; the early church also ministered in a pluralistic context, so the NT is exceedingly relevant).
2. Recognized or not, the doctrine of God lies at the heart of contemporary debates over pluralism (46; since God is transcendent, immanent, triune, utterly sovereign, personal, holy, loving, just, and gracious, then religious pluralism is not only impossible but is deeply rebellious, sinful).
3. Responsible discussion of pluralism cannot avoid the question of revelation (49; if God has, indeed, graciously given us revelation as to his nature and our responsibility, we have a *pou sto*).
4. In recent discussion, questions of revelation and truth have been sidestepped by appealing to hermeneutical realities, and this practice has become one of the most difficult features in the challenge of pluralism (54; the relatively recent developments in hermeneutical theory complicate our task of proclamation).
5. An adequate response to pluralism (in the [philosophical] sense) must work outward from a profound and deepening grasp of the Bible's entire storyline (60; our proclamation will not be understood and our expositions not accepted if we do not realize and compensate for the biblical illiteracy of our culture by deliberately appealing to the entire sweep of biblical revelation as a coherent, connected story).

Truth, viewed pluralistically as relative, cannot be assumed, either in our preaching or our witness. Our proclamation must not give the appearance of one option among many. We should most certainly not hinge our presentation of the gospel on our personal testimony, for that will be perceived by a postmodern audience as an interesting account of something that was helpful to us—just as some other experience has proved of existential benefit to them. Personal testimony may surely be included in a presentation of the gospel, but it dare not be the focal point or the authority. We may need to use more biblical narrative (so that our message has some context) rather than simply quoting a select handful of verses.¹¹³ In other words, the narrative of John 3 will sound more coherent to a postmodern hearer than Romans 3:23; 5:12; 6:23; and 10:9–10.

¹¹² D. A. Carson, "Christian Witness in an Age of Pluralism," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry*, ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, 31–66 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 42–64. For each item I have cited Carson's summary statement verbatim, followed by a parenthetical page reference on which it occurs, and then a brief (and partial) synopsis of the point as he develops it in the subsequent pages.

¹¹³ Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 155.

We must constantly push people back to biblical authority, even if they profess to disbelieve the Bible or accept it as only one among many such books. As we do so we need to emphasize that this is God’s revelation that is objectively true.¹¹⁴

How we do that will vary enormously depending on our audience. An unsophisticated hearer who has only absorbed the ethos of postmodernity will not need philosophical arguments. There a simple authority claim (“God says...”) will likely suffice. On the other hand, you will encounter more and more people who have a more sophisticated understanding of the issues. At that point you must be prepared to “take the roof off” their system by making their assumptions explicit and showing how it is that they cannot live consistently on that basis. That must be done, however, compassionately. It accomplishes little to destroy someone’s intellectual foundation by winning an argument; if that person does not sense that you care about him or her as a person, they will not be willing to listen to your positive presentation. As Erickson points out,

we will need to enter into the other person’s perspective, to think from his or her presuppositions. It means that we will have to listen to the deconstructionist, rather than just talking, which tends to be an occupational disease of both clergypersons and sometimes of lay Christians.¹¹⁵

In other areas of ministry, particularly within a local church setting, we must be prepared to respond more explicitly to the rising claims of inclusivism and the challenges to exclusivism. This may require some of the philosophical and logical considerations noted above, but it will certainly require a consistent biblical exposition of key texts, including (with the relevant contexts) Matthew 7:14; John 1:9; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 10 (esp. vv. 34–35); 14:16–17; 17; Romans 2:14–16; 10:9–10, etc. These passages should be treated *before* an issue arises and explicitly in light of the soteriological questions adduced by the inclusivists and the pluralists.

¹¹⁴ Carson points out some of these issues: *Gagging of God*, 36–37.

¹¹⁵ Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith*, 155.

Our preaching must be explicitly biblical. In order to do that we must preach positionally in light of the Bible's story line, never topically.¹¹⁶ This is necessary for three reasons. First, to demonstrate that there is a coherent message that proclaims a consistent world view. Second, because there is so much biblical illiteracy in the culture in general and, unfortunately, even in the church itself.¹¹⁷ Only persistent preaching of large chunks of the biblical narrative will correct that deficiency. We dare not settle for light-weight, surface discussions that quickly degenerate into "devotional" thoughts or manipulative exhortations. Third, although topical preaching has always been dangerous, the postmodern context in which we preach now magnifies the error of that methodology. The hop, skip, and jump approach that collects texts willy-nilly from all over the Bible, usually with no regard for their contexts, produces a decidedly postmodern, deconstructed pastiche. We give the impression that we are simply collecting the necessary snippets to create our own version of reality and provide our own (postmodern) reading of the text.

In the process of our biblical exposition, though we should not ignore legitimate application, we should be careful to avoid an anthropocentric approach. This is often done in an attempt to be relevant, but our focus should not be primarily on human needs—a self-help gospel; our preaching should be profoundly God-centered. Nor should we become entertainers, either in our "worship" or in the pulpit. Our task is not

¹¹⁶ I have addressed some of these homiletical concerns in an earlier essay: "When Bad Things Happen to a Good Text," available at <http://faculty.bbc.edu/rdecker/documents/preach.pdf>.

¹¹⁷ "In many parts of the country, we cannot assume any biblical knowledge on the part of our hearers at all: the most elementary biblical narratives are completely unknown. Furthermore, the situation is getting worse." After detailing some of the cultural issues that have produced this, he concludes that "we are thus ensuring that an entire generation will be even theoretically ignorant of the most elementary structures of the Judeo-Christian heritage on which our civilization has been nurtured. Worse (from the perspective of the preaching of the gospel), they will not have the 'hooks' on which to hang the appeals to the gospel that have been our staple" (Carson, *Gagging of God*, 42–43).

to entertain but to proclaim the revelation of a holy God to a needy people. That God-centered message *will* provide the real help that people, both modern and postmodern, really need.

Carson has thought deeply about these issues. Instead of unduly lengthening an already long paper, let me list his handful of suggestions on “Heralding the Gospel in a Pluralistic Culture” (the title of his ch. 12) and encourage you to read that chapter thoughtfully.

- A. Often it is helpful to critique the intellectual, moral, and existential bankruptcy of the age.
- B. In our evangelism we must start further back and nail down the turning points in redemptive history.
- C. We must herald, again and again, the rudiments of the historic gospel.
- D. While trying to think through what to say, we must think through how to live.¹¹⁸

These seemingly simple items do not sound profound. Perhaps not what you expected from someone like Carson.¹¹⁹ His explanations are, however, thought provoking as he reminds us that the gospel is never out of date. Even postmoderns need it. We ought not get caught up in reinventing the gospel and/or ministry; the message with which we were entrusted is always relevant. We may need to tweak our presentation of it so that it receives the hearing it is due, but we never tweak the message or the ministry mandates of Scripture. People are still lost, depraved sinners, beggars in need of the bread of life. Some things never change.

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¹¹⁸ Ibid., 491–514.

¹¹⁹ Do not make the mistake of thinking that Carson writes about heralding the gospel from an ivory tower; he is extensively involved in evangelistic ministry, particularly on college and university campuses in both the U.S. and Britain.

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