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# Postmodern Developments in Evangelical Theology

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POSTMODERN DEVELOPMENTS IN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

By

Robert Weston Siscoe

Honors Capstone Project

Submitted to the Faculty of

Olivet Nazarene University

for partial fulfillment of the requirements for

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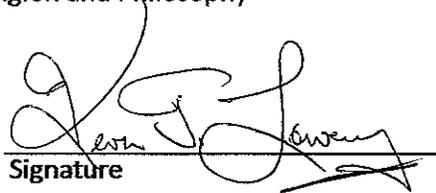
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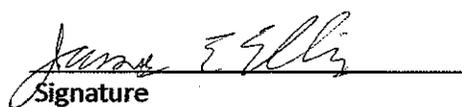
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## ABSTRACT

Postmodernism has created an epistemological and conceptual climate for different approaches to Evangelical theology. In this study, my purpose is to analyze contemporary trends in postmodern theology and investigate to what extent these trends are affecting Evangelicals. The categories of postmodern theology I have chosen for comparison are deconstructive theology, narrative theology, and radical orthodoxy. The first portion of my research summarizes their formative influences and current approaches in hopes that these observations can then be applied in specific contexts.

After a review of each of these theologies, I compared them to what I experienced in three Post-Evangelical congregations. The churches I chose to study are notable in that they are from an Evangelical heritage but are trying new approaches to theology and ministry, approaches that they themselves have characterized as postmodern. My purpose was to see to what extent these churches are impacted by prominent postmodern theological themes I had discovered from my research.

I found many connections between postmodern theological trends and the Post-Evangelical communities. The pastors I interviewed and the congregations they serve resonate with many of the ideas that came to the fore in my research. Nevertheless, most of the connections I found did not turn out to be influenced by the academic theologians that were the source of the ideas. In most cases, the influence came indirectly through authors who write for practitioners, translating the abstract ideas into practical advice for ministers. Thus, the postmodern perspective often diverges from the original emphases of the academic theologians in order to meet particular needs in specific contexts.

***Keywords:*** *Postmodern, Theology, Philosophy, Evangelical, Emergent, Ministry*

## INTRODUCTION

*In the past twenty years or so, postmodernity has become a concept that is as indispensable for understanding contemporary Western thought and culture as modernity has been for understanding the past three hundred years. For some, postmodernity marks the end of theology; for others, it is a new beginning.*

-Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, xiii.

### **The Study**

“Postmodern” has recently become an important description of the perspective of many contemporary Western intellectuals. Despite the difficulty in defining postmodernism, due to its many varieties, this development is something with which many theologians have begun to interact, with many even beginning to describe their own work as postmodern.<sup>1</sup> In light of this development, some Evangelical practitioners have begun to interact with postmodern theologies in a way that has been both adaptive and reconstructive. My purpose in this study is to analyze the shift from modern to postmodern theology and then to explore the relevance of this shift for these emerging American Evangelical theologies.

### **Defining Evangelicals**

My particular understanding of Evangelicalism is indebted to Mark Noll’s book *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*. Noll is both an observer of and participant in the American Evangelical movement, influencing Evangelical practice with works such as *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994) and *The Rise of*

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Vanhoozer, “Preface,” *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Keith Vanhoozer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), xiii.

*Evangelicalism* (2004). Noll is currently the Francis A. McManey Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, specializing in the history of American religious life, and he is a generally recognized scholar in the field of American religious history.

Noll recognizes central Evangelical beliefs as those shared between major Evangelical communities. According to Noll, all of the major Evangelical institutions affirm that the Bible is inspired by God and is thus infallible, giving it ultimate authority in matters of church belief and practice.<sup>2</sup> From the outset, this leads to statements of faith heavily dependent on the biblical text, many of them providing “explicit reference to individual biblical texts as the basis for their other doctrines.”<sup>3</sup> The strong biblical emphasis leads to a historically orthodox faith that affirms the holiness of God, the existence of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of the cross, and the final judgment.<sup>4</sup> A particular emphasis is also placed on the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in the form of a conversion experience, known by many Evangelicals as being “born again.” Within these common themes, an innovative mingling of pietism, orthodoxy, and fundamentalism with a very high doctrine of Scripture emerges into what has comprised twentieth-century Evangelicalism.

### **Selecting Participants**

My purpose is to analyze the influence of postmodern theology on Post-Evangelicals, an analysis that has significant doctrinal import. However, much of my investigation concentrates on trends in the institutions and leadership of Post-Evangelical

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 60-63

communities. While doctrines are still important to Evangelical identity, the emerging views of the participants of my study usually have not solidified in complete support or rejection of Evangelicalism. The directions they are moving are more evident in the trends of their ministry and theology than in calculated doctrinal formations. Thus, the influences of postmodernism are found more in the practical emphases of each of the individual pastors and congregations. For this reason, in summarizing each of the postmodern theological movements, my purpose is to summarize the main ideological and practical components of postmodern theology and then identify these within the Post-Evangelical communities.

### **The Academy**

Academic theologians play a primary role in theological developments since they have the time to contemplate and articulate detailed theological perspectives. These theologians then influence church practitioners through the dissemination of their ideas. For this reason, I begin each section by sketching the contours of a particular postmodern theological perspective and then applying that perspective to Evangelicals in general and to the Post-Evangelical congregations I visited. Many strains of postmodern theology exist amongst academic theologians, but for this study, I have limited my analysis to deconstructive theology, narrative theology, and radical orthodoxy. This typology attempts to encompass three major schools of thought and is very useful in describing and analyzing postmodernism's interaction with Evangelicals.

## **The Churches**

My study consists of three churches: Wicker Park Grace in downtown Chicago pastored by Nanette Sawyer, Reunion Church in Mokena, IL, pastored by Chuck Anderson, and Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, MI, pastored by Rob Bell. To assess these congregations, I visited them to obtain a perspective on their particular contexts and practices, accomplished in part by interviewing the pastors. I then identified correlations and discrepancies between the individual churches and the three academic forms of postmodern theology.

These churches qualify for the study to the extent that they embody the emerging postmodern, Post-Evangelical situation for theology. A few clarifying statements here may be helpful. “Emergent” has been a term adopted in recent years by many theologians and churches attempting to create new church communities and perspectives. My study is not intended to focus on or analyze this movement, even though many of the interviews refer to the Emergent Church. Any references to the Emergent Church are treated as potential stepping-stones between academic theologians and individual ministers and will be evaluated accordingly. The most important criterion is that churches identify themselves as attempting to minister with a postmodern approach. Another term that will be used frequently throughout the study is “Post-Evangelical.” This term is valuable for its ability to connote the Evangelical upbringing and heritage of the particular congregants while at the same time signaling their move outside traditional Evangelical constraints. For my use of this term, I am indebted to Scot McKnight’s article “The Ironic Faith of Emergents” in the September 2008 issue of *Christianity Today*. In this article, McKnight describes Post-Evangelicals as “building a new theology

that emerges from the story they find themselves in – namely, the shift from modernity to postmodernity.”<sup>5</sup> This understanding of Evangelicals engaging with postmodernism is the viewpoint I will use as well.

### **The Pastors**

My analysis takes a similar course with the ministers of the participating congregations. First, I chose them based on their adherence to the Evangelical tradition. This was measured by focusing particularly on their main emphases rather than on just their doctrinal beliefs. Identifying pastors as Post-Evangelicals is predicated on significant participation in Evangelical churches and institutions, followed by a more postmodern form of ministry.<sup>6</sup> After depicting the depths of their involvement with Evangelicalism, I then attempt to describe the trajectory that each one’s personal theology seems to be following and the extent to which postmodern theology influences and shapes this trajectory.

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<sup>5</sup> McKnight, Scot. “The Ironic Faith of Emergents.” *Christianity Today*, 26 September 2008.

<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, Rob Bell and Chuck Anderson conform very closely to the criteria of this study while Nanette Sawyer appears to be quite removed from the Evangelical fold.

## POSTMODERN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

### **Deconstructive Theology**

#### *Formative Influences of Deconstructive Theology*

One influential branch of postmodernism has been the deconstructive perspective of literary theorists. Roland Barthes, a prominent French literary critic, is renowned for announcing the “Death of the Author,” a perspective that emphasizes the reader’s interpretation of a text over the intentions of the author.<sup>7</sup> Barthes was reacting against literary critics who claim that the appropriate meaning of a literary work is found by discovering the author’s original situation and perspective. From his perspective, authors are already “dead,” both physically and in the way they affect their literary creations. What they originally intended for their work no longer matters because it is ultimately the reader’s interpretation that is important. Barthes argues that each time a reader interprets an author’s work, a new meaning to that work is born, a meaning that disregards the influence of the author. In this way, literary works are transformed throughout history as they are read, leaving the author as merely the initiator of a long series of idiosyncratic approaches to a literary work. Unfortunately, for Barthes, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”<sup>8</sup>

This shift in literary interpretation yields several interesting consequences. First and foremost, readers are no longer completely in control of the way they interpret literature. Even though many readers like to think that they can get back to what the

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<sup>7</sup> This article was originally published in 1968 in the French magazine *Manteia*.

<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Keith Barry Grant (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 100.

author originally meant, all they can do is create meaning out of the language that they have acquired.<sup>9</sup> Many people assume that they primarily have private experiences and then use language to express those experiences to others. However, from Barthes' perspective, the cultural language that a person has inherited is primary, and the way an individual interacts with this language is secondary.<sup>10</sup> Imagine if people attempted to invent new words to describe their experiences. They would intend to use these words in communication, yet if the words were entirely new, they would not have any public meaning. Instead, these words would need to be taught before they could be used to communicate.<sup>11</sup> Communication thus requires individuals to submit to the meanings that already socially exist in their individual cultures.

Secondly, readers can only create new meanings of literature; they cannot recover the original meanings. Since we inherit language from our contemporary culture, we can only say what the text means within our own context. We cannot discover all of the connotations that were intended by the author. Consequently, readers can only bring their own meanings to literature and create unique, personal interpretations of the text. Reading is often regarded as a passive activity whereby a reader simply absorbs information from the page. From Barthes' perspective, though, a reader is more like an actor, a person who imaginatively speaks the lines of literature while giving them renewed significance. Actors attempt to put themselves in the position of their

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that, as a structuralist, Barthes views language as a series of inter-linguistic relationships that are not necessarily controlled by the linguistic subject. Rather, people are born into a culture of inherited meanings that determine their interpretations.

<sup>10</sup> Young children do not *learn* a language (as if they had anything to which to compare it), but rather *grow* in one (or more). To some extent, modern theories of language acquisition support this description (Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction*, 78).

<sup>11</sup> This is a rough adaptation of Wittgenstein's critique of private language. Only by submitting to the communal "form of life" and absorbing the already existent symbolic meanings can people have access to the world (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §256-257).

characters, creatively interpreting their lines, both imagining them in the past but also giving them current significance. Depending on a reader's inherited meanings, The text may be interpreted in a way that closely reflects the author's intent, or it may be understood in a completely new way. A piece of literature thus never has a final meaning. Naming the author and professing, with an air of finality, to know the author's intentions essentially masks the relationship that readers have with literature.<sup>12</sup> The reading is never closed, never dead. Rather, it is reborn in every encounter with the text it represents.

Given this insight, the origin of meaning shifts. The question is no longer, "What was the author's intended meaning?" but now it is, "How does the reader currently understand it?" Barthes argued that this understanding will be determined by the culture in which the reader lives. This idea is developed further by the philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard takes this idea of culturally-shaped perspectives and insists that these perspectives are passed on through narratives.<sup>13</sup> Through stories the language of a society acquires its public meaning. Since the stories that different cultures tell about the world differ significantly, different cultures will have different understandings. Their standards for rationality and good judgment will be determined ultimately by the stories that they tell.<sup>14</sup> In order to make a competent public judgment, a person must know what significance a particular culture attaches to different referents. Good descriptions take different forms in different narrative worlds.

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<sup>12</sup> "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes, 99).

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1984), 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

When all of human understanding is described as distinct narrative worlds, the question inevitably becomes, “Why this particular narrative world?” What authorizes it to claim that its understandings are the best? Lyotard argues that narrative worlds can only turn back to the stories they tell for self-legitimation. Narratives are capable of providing their own legitimation by virtue of being told, and since the original understanding was created through participation in a narrative world, the only way to defend this perspective is to immerse oneself back into the narrative.<sup>15</sup> For the modern West, the prevalent narratives depend on the Enlightenment story of progress.<sup>16</sup> Lyotard identifies two different branches of the Enlightenment story: the liberation of humanity and the speculative unity of all knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Together, these stories serve as the ruling stories of the Western world. Unfortunately, these grand narratives are beginning to be dethroned as the West’s means of self-understanding. In the modern period, theoretical knowledge has always been controlled by some type of grand narrative, including, “the dialectics of Spirit (Hegel), the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject (Kant, Marx), or the creation of wealth (Smith).”<sup>18</sup> However, since the end of WWII, these grand narratives have lost much of their persuasive power. In fact, Lyotard goes so far as to define our current epoch as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>19</sup> The West is starting to disbelieve the stories it tells about itself,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 27-30.

<sup>17</sup> Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), 137. This is Sarup’s summary of Lyotard in attempting to describe in *The Postmodern Condition*, 31-37.

<sup>18</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii.

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

leading to a situation where any narrative understanding is rejected. Thus, the dependence on any grand narrative for final meaning is being seriously doubted.

Strangely enough, it seems that science contributed significantly to this society of disbelief. Even though science owes its preeminence to Enlightenment rationality, it has undermined the grounds on which this story stood. First of all, it has called into question the truthfulness of narrative itself. Under the critical eye of science, narratives become nothing more than fables, myths, and legends.<sup>20</sup> This disregard for narrative ends up discounting the Enlightenment narrative that gave science precedence. In this way, science turns on itself and destroys its own metaphysical legitimation. Science also weakens the appeal of the grand narrative through the creation of technology. As we develop ways to master individual tasks and activities, we inevitably concentrate more on the task at hand and less on the legitimacy of the task. Technology thus emphasizes the means rather than the ends.<sup>21</sup> In these ways, the critical attitude and pragmatic aims of science have rendered grand narratives epistemologically impossible.

At this point, Lyotard asks, “Where, after metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?”<sup>22</sup> Is there anywhere that humanity can reach a universal understanding? Lyotard ends his account with an ethical denial. Since there is no ultimate way of viewing the world, no particular worldview should be used to oppress others. Any way of viewing the world that claims to be comprehensive is merely extending itself beyond its own limits. Understanding can now only be temporary and particular.<sup>23</sup> Even though this may seem nihilistic, from Lyotard’s perspective this is simply ethical relativism. The

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, xxiv-xxv.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 66.

entire history of the West's imperialism demonstrates the dangers of creating a closed system of meaning. Any approach that attempts to recast a grand narrative will end up creating a system like the old one, where inquiry is limited and idiosyncratic understandings are subjugated by the grand narrative.

### *Notable Approaches to Deconstructive Theology*

The combination of Barthes' and Lyotard's post-structuralism creates distinctive problems for Christian theology. Perhaps even more so than secular worldviews, Christianity has depended on grand narratives for its description of history.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, an overarching history is no longer possible due to the implausibility of an ultimate theory of meaning. A brief look at biblical hermeneutics is sufficient to reveal the effects of this viewpoint.

A significant amount of biblical interpretation holds that it is the author's intended meaning that determines the meaning of a text. As we saw with Barthes, a text does not acquire significance from its author, but rather through its interaction with a reader. This destroys the notion of original meaning. Barthes says, "We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."<sup>25</sup> Biblical scholars might suggest that this poses no problem for the search for theological meaning. Instead, they might claim that the philosophical knowledge of the modern age is able to provide them with an enlightened system of meaning that is

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<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Worthen, "Theology and the History of Metanarrative: Clarifying the Postmodern Question," *Modern Believing* 42 (2001): 19-22.

<sup>25</sup> Barthes, "Death of the Author," 99

capable of judging how the biblical text should *currently* be interpreted.<sup>26</sup> This approach, however, is also cast aside by the advocates of post-structuralism. According to Lyotard, there is no central language, no metadiscourse to which we must orient ourselves. There is a plurality of legitimate understandings that all have their own individual standards. There is no reason to think that the biblical viewpoint is *the* perspective on life; it is only one of many potential perspectives. Barthes and Lyotard together form a critique that makes composing a comprehensive Christian narrative conceptually impossible.

Despite these difficulties, there is no reason to suppose that the death of Christian theology automatically accompanies the death of the metanarrative. Christian theology has proved itself to be remarkably resilient to the turbulent waves of cultural and ideological shifts, and a rebuttal is possible.<sup>27</sup> For this reason it may be possible to sketch

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<sup>26</sup> This is often the approach of liberal theologians.

<sup>27</sup> Middleton and Walsh have suggested that the Christian narrative does not fall under Lyotard's totalizing metanarrative, arguing that the Christian narrative is essentially anti-totalizing and just (Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be*, 107). While this may be helpful for the Christian narrative, it still does not completely overcome Lyotard's criticisms. As we have seen, Lyotard's criticism is not primarily ethical; first and foremost it is epistemological. Even a liberating metanarrative falls under this criticism. James Smith suggests that Lyotard only condemns those metanarratives that claim to be supported by universal reason. According to Smith, Lyotard criticizes modern metanarratives by showing that, "Modernity appeals to [universal, autonomous reason] to legitimate its claim" (*Whose Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 107). With the birth of a multiplicity of incommensurable language games, autonomous reason collapses and the all-encompassing modern narrative is no longer legitimate. Smith thus claims that the Christian narrative is still possible because it does not instantiate itself through appeals to universal reason. Smith provides a very helpful reading of Lyotard, drawing out the appeal that modern metanarratives made to reason. However, the scholarly consensus seems to be that the Christian metanarrative falls under Lyotard's definition (Thacker, "Lyotard and the Christian Metanarrative," 308-310). When Lyotard describes metanarratives, he distinguishes between different types. The modern does make an appeal to universal reason, but it is far from the only type of metanarrative (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiii-xxiv). Furthermore, it seems that Lyotard clearly recognizes the Christian narrative of "redemption of original sin through love" as a metanarrative. (*The Postmodern Explained*, 25). For these reasons, it seems that Lyotard's rejection of grand narratives is a rejection of the traditional Christian narrative as well (Michener, *Engaging Deconstructive Theology*, 56).

a Christian theology that accepts the terms of Barthes and Lyotard's arguments.<sup>28</sup> It may seem that the fusion of "the death of the author" and "the multiplicity of narratives" forms an irreparable rift between post-structuralism and Christianity. Nevertheless, I believe that some valuable insights from Harvey Cox and John Caputo are useful for constructing a "theology without theology" that is capable of functioning under these parameters.

First of all, I want to highlight observations from Harvey Cox's secular theology. In *The Secular City*, Cox begins by observing the detrimental effects that secularization has had on religiosity. The secular city has two main motifs that can be used to summarize its effect: pragmatism and profanity.<sup>29</sup> Contemporary humanity is very pragmatic in that it is much more concerned with the practical things of everyday life than the spiritual element of life. "Life for [secular man] is a set of problems, not an unfathomable mystery."<sup>30</sup> Attention is turned to the profane instead of the sacred. The man of the era becomes focused on this world, regarding it over and above supernatural realities.<sup>31</sup> This draws striking similarities to Lyotard's speculations about the effects of technology. People are no longer chiefly concerned with metaphysical or metanarrative speculation. Technology brings pragmatism, an emphasis of means over ends. People then lose interest in and become incredulous toward both metanarratives and religious faith.

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<sup>28</sup> It is possible to argue that Barthes' and Lyotard's thoughts contain many inconsistencies that would not stand up under analytic philosophical scrutiny, and a number of critics have made such arguments. However, this will not be the direction of my exploration.

<sup>29</sup> Harvey Cox, *Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 60-61.

Due to this cultural shift, Cox contends that the church needs to find a new way to speak about God. To the secular world, the word “God” has become empty. “[Secular man’s] mental world and way of using language is such that he can neither understand nor use the word *God* meaningfully.”<sup>32</sup> Cox also has a definite vision for how the church should move forward. The name of God has primarily lost its power because of its historical contingency. It was appropriate for one time and place, but its continued use is empty.<sup>33</sup> In response, the Church should recreate the concept of the divine being for this secular age. The church must understand where “God” is acting now, and become part of the life and signs of his kingdom in a contemporary way.<sup>34</sup> This will allow the spiritual aspects of life to regain their relevance and importance. That may require the Church to declare a moratorium and “stop talking about ‘God’ for a while [...] until the new name emerges.”<sup>35</sup> The Church must accomplish this so that the One who reveals himself through Jesus is not hampered by the hollow concept of “God.” At various times in Israel’s history, Yahweh received new names to designate the ways he had interacted with the Jewish people.<sup>36</sup> For Christians it is no different, and a new sense must be discovered in their reference to the deity in the secular age.

John Caputo continues the deconstruction of the name of God in his “weak theology.” For Caputo, “strong theology” has historically dominated the theological landscape. When he speaks of strong theology, he means highly ramified theologies. These theological systems go beyond a mere theological event to draw a host of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 243-248. Cox mentions that it was particularly appropriate for European medieval society.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 147.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 266.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 267.

metaphysical inferences from religious experiences. In this way, “the name of God has historical determinacy and specificity – it is Christian or Jewish or Islamic.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast, weak theology recognizes this historical determinacy and the limits of human understanding. It disposes of highly ramified metaphysical theologies and is willing to admit the inadequacies of viewing “God” from any one perspective. In this sense, it is more open-ended, allowing new names of God to be created through interactions with theological events.

At this point, weak theology is able to address the plurality of cultural understandings, but it does not seem capable of saying anything cross-cultural. Instead, it just relativizes all descriptions of God without reclaiming any substantive content. This is where Caputo introduces the crucial concept of a “theology of the event.”<sup>38</sup> Caputo borrows the notion of the event from deconstruction. In the midst of deconstruction, the historical event is the only thing left standing.<sup>39</sup> Deconstruction dismantles the description erected around the event, all the while affirming that there is something upon

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<sup>37</sup> John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Events are radically different from names. First, names are incapable of fully containing an event. Names designate one possible interpretation of the event, but events cannot be reduced to their names. Theological events in particular are usually sheltered under the name of God. For Caputo, this “name of God is the name of an event rather than an entity” (Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 12). The event within the name maintains an autonomy that can never be captured, a restless creativity that is translatable into many names. Another important characteristic of the event is its messianic possibilities. The event breaks in, defying all systems and *Signs*, radically recreating the cultural landscape. Its indeconstructible nature confronts prevailing assumptions, presenting to people the ability to be *born again* and to renew their understanding of the world (Caputo, *After the Death of God*, 51). The simple name of “God” does not contain this possibility. It is only possible through the interaction with theological events that sacred anarchy can reform us (Ibid, 61). Caputo uses “Sacred Anarchy” to describe the revolutionary character of theological events, specifically those of the Kingdom of God. Anarchies upset the status quo, jolting us to life and its deconstructible nature, and sending us grasping for interaction with the stability and indeconstructibility of the event.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 6.

which the description depends.<sup>40</sup> On this basis weak theology affirms the theological event around which different schemas are constructed. This explicitly resembles Cox's suggestion that theology should be centered not on "God" but on the event of Jesus in history. A theology of the event is the axis on which all contingent Christian theologies revolve, including secular theology.

A synthesis of Caputo's weak theology and Cox's secular theology enable Christian theology to respond to the critique of postmodernism. Barthes' and Lyotard's post-structuralism suggests that all perspectives are radically contingent, and this debilitates the possibility of the Christian narrative. However, Cox accepts this contingency and admits that Christians may need to create new ways to talk about "God," ways that communicate him effectively to a secular generation. And what is the basis of this name? It is none other than a theology of the event.<sup>41</sup> Christian theology can move forward with an emphasis on the event of Jesus, allowing it to be adapted and created by the cultures with which it interacts. This is the theological response to Barthes' death of the author. In this new schema, there is plenty of room for different readings and interpretations of theological events. There is no longer one central theology, but a multiplicity of historically situated theologies that embody the languages of varying cultures. I agree with Lyotard that there no longer has to be a Christian metanarrative of history on which all the other smaller theologies rely. They can each work within their own languages without any recourse to an overarching philosophy or theology. The

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<sup>40</sup> John Caputo, *After the Death of God*, Edited by Jeffrey Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 119.

<sup>41</sup> Despite the fact that theological systems are based in circumstance, there is a certain immutable nature in theological events that hold the power to transform people. These realizations, coupled together, result in a non-dogmatic dogma, an unramified doctrinal system, a "Theology without Theology."

name of God can be recreated again and again with an ongoing awareness of the linguistic limits on which that name is conditioned.

*Deconstructive Theology and Evangelicals*

In a *Christianity Today* article from September 2008, Scot McKnight identifies several catalysts that are shaping Post-Evangelicals, indicating that deconstruction is a primary cultural factor.<sup>42</sup> Many Post-Evangelicals have grown up in cultures that support multiculturalism. Educational institutions emphasize the linguistic and cultural limitations of individual cultures, tainting even religious doctrines with historical relativism. This has led many young Evangelicals to abandon the certainties of their own theological systems and embrace “a more pluralistic view of world religions and a broadening of what it means to be a ‘Christian’.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, many Post-Evangelicals claim that the exclusive Old Testament view of God is limited to the perspective of ancient Israel. The merciful and loving God revealed in Jesus though is a fuller revelation that should direct us to be more open to God’s work outside of the confines of the Christian community.<sup>44</sup> These understandings have led to a Christian perspective that is much more relativistic.

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<sup>42</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Ironic Faith of Emergents,” *Christianity Today*, 26 September 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

## **Narrative Theology**

### *Formative Influences of Narrative Theology*

In 1974, Hans Wilhelm Frei published *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, initiating a theological perspective that would come to be known as narrative or postliberal theology. In this volume, he pointed out the shortcomings of the modern view of the Bible and attempted to recapture the narrative structure of Scripture, arguing that faithfulness to the biblical text includes much more than arid abstractions and propositions. His perspective then contributed to the theological movement known as the Yale School.<sup>45</sup> This school of thought formulated its unique perspective by examining and critiquing some of the central tenets of modern philosophy and theology. By challenging some of the main elements of modern theology, narrative theology emerged as a genuine postmodern theological option.

George Lindbeck, a Yale theology professor from 1952 to 1993, divides modern theology into two main categories. The first category, usually the more conservative of the two, Lindbeck calls “cognitive-propositional.” This approach views religious doctrines as similar to statements expressed in philosophy and science. They describe features of reality.<sup>46</sup> From this perspective, the creeds are thought to contain true propositions that are acknowledged by believers. On the other hand, the “experiential-expressive” view of religious doctrines takes a quite different approach. This perspective treats religious statements as representations of religious emotion. Religious doctrines

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<sup>45</sup> The list of names associated with this school is anything but official. Some of the most common mentioned are George Lindbeck, Ronald Thiemann, and Stanley Hauerwas.

<sup>46</sup> Cognitive-propositionalism primarily “emphasizes the cognitive aspects of religion and stresses the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities.” (Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 16).

are only significant to the extent that they express the religious attitudes of their adherents.<sup>47</sup> These are two of the most persistent forms of modern theology active in Christian theology today.

However, according to Lindbeck, recent Christian dialogue has made these perspectives untenable. As an ecumenist, Lindbeck has participated in several ecumenical dialogues, even observing the Second Vatican Council. Throughout these discussions, Lindbeck has witnessed progress on doctrinal agreement that is not easily accounted for by either the cognitive-propositional or the experiential-expressive conceptions of doctrine.<sup>48</sup> For this reason, Lindbeck argues that a better, fuller understanding of Christian doctrine is necessary to describe doctrinal development. According to him, “A third, postliberal, way of perceiving religion and religious doctrine is called for.”<sup>49</sup>

It is at this point that Frei’s theological program in *Eclipse* becomes especially important. Frei suggests that modern hermeneutical perspectives have been compromised by a historical emphasis originating in the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the significance of the biblical narratives increasingly came to be defined by the extent to which they can be confirmed by the

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<sup>47</sup> Religious doctrines serve as “symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations.” For experiential-expressivists, beneath the surface of their disparate doctrinal formations, it is “at least logically possible that a Buddhist and a Christian might have basically the same faith, although expressed very differently” (Ibid, 17).

<sup>48</sup> The cognitive-propositional understanding of religion tends to suggest that the vast doctrinal diversity amongst Christian communities can never be reconciled. “Agreement can be reached only if one or both sides abandon their earlier positions,” (Lindbeck, 16) leaving a situation that is hostile to any doctrinal development, without the idea of any doctrinal constancy. The experiential-expressive model actually fares much worse, yielding an understanding of doctrine that attributes no value to particular doctrinal formations. At its heart, the liberal approach affirms that all people share in a similar core religious experience (Ibid, 32), but it provides no linguistic tools to describe and assess different expressions of it.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 7.

historical method. Biblical study subordinated itself to the historical method, yielding a biblical text whose primary virtue was historical reference.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, conservative orthodox believers and liberal theorists of religion both came to view Scripture merely as a repository of historical facts. Even if believers thought the Bible was revelatory, they understood it primarily as providing information concerning some extra-textual referent.<sup>51</sup> Frei believed that this hermeneutical procedure was not faithful to more traditional ways of viewing the biblical narratives. According to Frei, a more communally acceptable approach has been an understanding of Scripture as realistic narrative.<sup>52</sup> Modern hermeneutics too often has discarded the predominant narrative in the interest of historical critical study.

### *Notable Approaches to Narrative Theology*

Frei puts this method to work in his study of the Synoptic Gospels, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*. Instead of preoccupying himself with historical matters, Frei concentrates on the implications of reading the narratives in their entirety as they develop the identity of Christ.<sup>53</sup> He describes this methodology as a “literal” reading of Scripture.<sup>54</sup> For Frei,

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<sup>50</sup> Frei described his analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hermeneutics as confirming that “everything conspired to confine explicative hermeneutics to meaning as reference—to equate meaning with knowledge of potential or actual reality—and to make the primary reference historical rather than ideal” (Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 103).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Scripture does not try to portray the character of Christ in an epic myth or resort to symbolic and moralistic interpretations of fables. Instead, Scripture presents itself as a possible world in a way that is realistic and history-like (Frei, 10). An important aspect of this is the figural characters and situations that the narratives develop. Frei wants to retrieve the narrative reading of the biblical narratives, “especially the synoptic gospels . . . for which their narrative rendering, in effect a cumulative account of the theme, is indispensable” (Frei 13).

<sup>53</sup> Livingston says that Frei “follows his own method of literal reading as he brackets historical-critical questions.” (Livingston and Fiorenza, “History and Hermeneutics,” 372).

a literal reading of the Gospels is centered on Jesus' identity, which is communicated through the telling of the Gospel narratives. In *The Identity of Jesus*, Frei continually encourages his readers to "observe the story itself," attending to the ways that the narrative shapes and gives life to the identity of Christ through its structure and progression.<sup>55</sup> Through this method, Frei hopes to avoid the excessive abstraction and qualification of the modern historical approach and capture how the narratives themselves portray Christ.

Frei hopes that a hermeneutic like this will help Protestantism appropriate the Christian narratives in a way that is faithful to traditional approaches to Scripture. While contemporary historical and philosophical critics attempt to locate the Bible in the larger picture of reality, a recovery of a narrative reading of Scripture makes possible the "incorporating of extra-biblical thought, experience, and reality into the one real world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story."<sup>56</sup> This is where Lindbeck's observations prove beneficial. Lindbeck views Frei's faithfulness to Scripture and the Christian tradition as a helpful turn towards a postliberal approach to theology. This theology finds itself describing the contours and the norms of the Christian community found captured in the biblical narratives. Instead of assuming the preeminence of

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<sup>54</sup> When many envision a "literal" reading of Scripture, they often equate it with a fundamentalist reading of allegorical parts of Scripture. Frei however means something quite different by a literal reading. For Frei, the *sensus literalis* understands Jesus as the central subject of the Gospel narratives and uses that as the primary factor in his reading. The literal sense "applies primarily to the identification of Jesus as the ascriptive subject of the descriptions or stories told about him and in relation to him – whether the status of this identification is that of chief character in a narrative plot, historically factual person, or reality under an ontological scheme." (Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, 5).

<sup>55</sup> Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 87.

<sup>56</sup> Frei, *Eclipse*, 3.

contemporary culture and rationality, theology should delve into the world of Scripture and then relate the contemporary world to the biblical world.<sup>57</sup>

For Lindbeck and Frei, the main problem with conservative and liberal forms of contemporary theology is their dependence on a correspondence theory of truth. This has misled both liberals and conservatives to view the value of the Bible primarily as a literal historical reference. Whereas liberals viewed this historical accuracy as highly suspect, fundamentalists reacted in the opposite direction and affirmed the complete literal historical truth of the biblical text. This then led to the downplaying of a literary, typological understanding of Scripture, an understanding that dominated Christian interactions with Scripture until the Enlightenment.<sup>58</sup> For Frei, the stories the Gospels tell about Jesus attribute to him much more than any historical reconstruction will reveal. Instead, the Christian meaning of these narratives is found by engaging with the stories on a literary level, not merely on a historical level.

For these reasons, narrative theology tends to abandon foundational epistemological theories and instead focuses on the specific way of life found in the

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<sup>57</sup>The Bible evokes its own “domain of meaning” just like “masterpieces such as *Oedipus Rex* and *War and Peace*, for example, evoke their own domains of meaning. They do so by what they themselves say about the events and personages of which they tell. In order to understand them in their own terms, there is no need for extraneous references to, for example, Freud’s theories or historical treatments of the Napoleonic wars” (Lindbeck, 116). Similarly, understanding Scripture does not require a complete deferral to other systems of meaning or significance. Meaning can instead be derived from the lenses they provide. This approach to Christian theology and self-understanding enables the theologian to think critically about Christian thought and practice while still remaining within the cultural-linguistic horizon of meaning.

<sup>58</sup> Hans Frei, “‘Narrative’ in Christian and Modern Reading,” in *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck*, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 150-152. For this reason, Frei thinks that “liberals and fundamentalists are siblings under the skin in . . . confusing ascriptive and descriptive literalism about Jesus” (Frei, *Types*, 84). Lindbeck agrees that his typology fits Frei’s suggestion that “fundamentalist literalism, like experiential-expressivism, is a product of modernity” (Lindbeck, 51). Both rely on an emphasis on a correspondence theory of truth as the basis of their theological reflection.

Christian community. For the postliberals, the basic principles of Christianity cannot be drawn from an outside intellectual authority but must originate within the culture of the Christian.<sup>59</sup> This perspective emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of the Christian way of life and notes that doctrines arise from this milieu, not vice versa. In this schema, theological reflection is not the original basis of Christian doctrine. It owes its motivation to the activities and experiences of the Christian community. Lindbeck argues that theology is a “second-order discourse” because it only exists in light of the religious life of the church.<sup>60</sup> This does not make reflection about language useless, but it does imply the existence of many pre-reflective forms of human life and development. It is in these pre-reflective forms that much of Christian life and tradition is found. Theological discourse thus becomes a conversation about the regulative principles that already inherently function in the Christian community; it does not invent them from scratch.<sup>61</sup>

This leads postliberalism to reject all forms of correlational theology. In Hans Frei’s work, *Types of Christian Theology*, he classifies theologies according to how faithful they are to Christian self-description.<sup>62</sup> Strictly philosophical theologies are often

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<sup>59</sup> Lindbeck calls this approach to theology a cultural-linguistic approach.

<sup>60</sup> Lindbeck expresses this by saying that “technical theology and official doctrine . . . are second-order discourse about the first-intentional uses of religious language” (Lindbeck, 69). Here, Lindbeck owes this line of thinking to Ludwig Wittgenstein. Lindbeck agrees with Wittgenstein that private language is impossible because all languages are beholden to some obligatory form of life (Ibid, 38).

<sup>61</sup> Instead, these distinctive principles are already in place because, “theology presupposes a communal network of beliefs and practices that are guided by certain essentials necessary to the identity of the community” (Livingston and Fiorenza, 521).

<sup>62</sup> Philosophical theologies like those of Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte, or Gordon Kaufman correlate theological significance with philosophical significance and surrender all forms of meaning to philosophy. Other liberal theologies like those of Rudolf Bultmann, David Tracy, and Karl Rahner correlate the Christian gospel as well, but rely on the “spirit” of a particular cultural sensibility. Pragmatic theories of religious sensibility, like those of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Paul Tillich, tend to be correlationist in that they attempt to communicate in culturally acceptable terms, but also tend to be more faithful to and

not very faithful to the Christian community's self-understanding, while pragmatic theologies often are more reflective of the Church's own perspective. Frei offers this exposition in order to chart a course forward for narrative theology by evaluating and perhaps appropriating their perspectives. According to Frei, pragmatic and fideistic schemes offer the best chance of articulating the literal sense of Scripture without resorting to theology that is strictly correlational.<sup>63</sup> Even though all types of theology are useful, Frei thinks that any theology that proceeds predominantly by correlation will severely compromise the self-understanding of the Christian community.

For this reason, postliberal theology advocates an ad hoc response to cultural and philosophical alternatives. Any apologetics that attempts to translate the inner life of the Christian into other terms irreducibly impairs it and ends up subjugating it to the dominant cultural rationality. Indeed, some tenets of Christian theology completely defy explanation in other conceptual frameworks. For example, Christian tradition has long held that Christ is both divine and human, but it has resisted attempts to correlate that with either psychology or theories of divine inspiration. Instead, Christianity has been satisfied to declare this without completely explaining it in other language. To some extent, Christianity has to use this ad hoc correlation to express itself in culturally intelligible terms.<sup>64</sup> Even though Christianity intends to speak intelligibly, it can never

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originate in Christian self-description. The fourth type is also faithful to Christian self-description which then limits the applicability of modern theories to practical theology. As a result, Christian doctrines come to function as the underlying principles of Christian discourse while maintaining a relationship to the outside world that is always fragmentary at best. Theologies of this stripe are provided by Karl Barth, John Henry Newman, and Jonathan Edwards. Lastly, the Wittgensteinian fideists see no relation between theoretical concerns and Christian self-description at all. The most prominent supporter of this interpretation of Christianity is D. Z. Phillips (Frei, *Types*, 3-4).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 5-6.

<sup>64</sup> Lindbeck notes that this "resistance to translation does wholly exclude apologetics, but this must be of an ad hoc and nonfoundational variety rather than standing at the center of theology" (129). Frei

surrender itself to another explanatory scheme without sacrificing at least some of its distinctive tenets. Ad hoc correlation protects theology in this way, preventing it from being systematically undercut by alien ideologies. Nevertheless, Christianity should still attempt to converse with the presiding cultural norms, especially for evangelistic purposes. For Lindbeck, evangelists utilize, “public and communal traditions as optional aids in individual self-realization rather than as bearers of normative realities to be interiorized.”<sup>65</sup> Interpreting the Christian faith within the contexts of these traditions does not jeopardize the original integrity of the Christian tradition. This only comes when the Christian faith is *equated* with prevailing cultural norms and is forced into that mold.

### *Narrative Theology and Evangelicals*

One of the first encounters between Evangelical and narrative theology occurred when Carl Henry gave a lecture series at Yale in November of 1985. Henry used one of these lectures to critique narrative theology, specifically the work of Hans Frei.<sup>66</sup>

In his critique, Henry claims that before the ravages of modernism, Scripture was generally regarded as containing propositional truths about God that are to be interpreted with reference to the intentions of the biblical authors.<sup>67</sup> Amongst these inspired writings are many genres including law, letters, and literature. Henry points out that binding it all

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suggests that for postliberal theologians “the combination here is not a correlation between equals but an unsystematic, always ad hoc performance of subordinating explanatory theory and philosophy more generally, as a tool in Christian communal self-description, so that in effect a conceptual scheme may function only interpretively or descriptively in a Christian context.” (Frei, *Types*, 81)

<sup>65</sup> Lindbeck, 23.

<sup>66</sup> This critique along with Frei’s response was reprinted in the Spring 1987 edition of the *Trinity Journal*.

<sup>67</sup> Carl Henry, “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,” *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987): 3.

together into one central narrative oversimplifies the unity of Scripture.<sup>68</sup> Carl Henry also thinks that Frei's method is too ambiguous when it comes to historical reference. Frei's approach "remove[s] from the interpretative process any text-transcendent referent," leading to the conclusion that faith can be detached from any grounding in reality.<sup>69</sup> Henry also wants assurance that the Bible will remain inerrant in the Evangelical sense, even for narrative theologians. To him, the terms "verbally inspired" and "inerrant" are the best ways that the church has conceptualized its commitment to Scripture, a claim that seems to be downplayed and possibly neglected by narrative theologians.<sup>70</sup> Throughout Henry's critique of narrative theology, it becomes clear that he wants the assurance that Scripture is more than just an important part of the Christian language-game. It is God's verbally inspired Word, completely inerrant in all respects. Only when the revelation of God is secure will he admit the value of narrative criticism. The narrative nature of Scripture is important but the doctrine of revelation is Henry's main concern.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Henry, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Henry, 14.

<sup>71</sup> Hans Frei responds, by his own admission, with a collection of comments rather than a fully articulated response. Along with that, Frei acknowledges that he does not often engage in discussion with Evangelicals. In fact, he says that *Eclipse* was responding to liberals who, "if something didn't seem to fit the world view of the day, quickly reinterpreted it" (Frei, "Response To 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" 21). From there, he begins his comments directed specifically towards Henry's concerns. Frei admits that not all of the Bible is narrative in form, but he maintains that the overarching sense of it is a narrative that identifies and finds completion in the person of Christ. He calls the text a sufficient "witness to the Word of God," (Ibid, 21-22) indicating that extra-biblical evidence and argumentation isn't necessary. Frei concedes that when he is in heaven and can witness a consortium between Sellars, Plantinga, Quine, Mill, Kant, and Aristotle, and they agree on the starting points of all knowledge and thus also theology, perhaps then he will have a prolegomena for a natural theology. Until then, however, his theology will consist of "the right conceptual redescription of the biblical narrative" (Ibid, 23.) To this end, he prioritizes the Christian church's self-description above any form of philosophical theory or system. He agrees with Henry that "using the term 'God' Christianly is in some sense referential. But that doesn't mean that I have a theory of reference to tell you how it refers" (Ibid, 23). Frei assures his readers that he doesn't want to deny reference as a sense of the biblical text, but he

Evangelical criticisms of narrative theology have not been limited to Carl Henry. Alister McGrath finds the postliberal view of truth equally as troubling. Even though Hans Frei affirms that in some sense Christian language is referential, it seem like the downplaying of that significance in postliberal theology is more thoroughgoing than is necessary. As McGrath observes:

Lindbeck, by accident or design, is perhaps somewhat equivocal over whether or not his cultural-linguistic approach to doctrine involves the affirmation or setting aside of epistemological realism and a correspondence theory of truth. The overall impression gained is that he considers consistency much more important than correspondence ... At this point evangelicalism makes one of its most serious criticisms of postliberalism. For evangelicals, postliberalism reduces the concept of truth to internal consistency.<sup>72</sup>

For Evangelicals, this equivocation and avoidance of the referential necessity of Christian truth seems to be a significant weakness of postliberal thought. Recognizing theology as a second-order regulative discourse falls far short of saying it declares the truth about spiritual realities. Evangelicals want the reassurance that Christianity is not just one potential language game, and they also want postliberalism to provide criteria for assessing the Christian community. Despite these objections, narrative theology has become influential and attractive to many Evangelicals.<sup>73</sup>

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wants to open it to other possibilities as well. The reference to Jesus Christ doesn't refer in any ordinary sense of the word and shouldn't be limited to that. In this article, Frei once again resists correlating theology with any philosophical program, liberal or Evangelical.

<sup>72</sup> Alister McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism," *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. George Lindbeck, Dennis Okholm, and Timothy Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 38.

<sup>73</sup> Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, "The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals," *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. George Lindbeck, Dennis Okholm, and Timothy Phillips (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 14-15.

## **Radical Orthodoxy**

### *Formative Influences of Radical Orthodoxy*

In 1990, John Milbank published *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, unofficially ushering in a new theological movement that has come to be known as radical orthodoxy.<sup>74</sup> In the volume, Milbank argues that the separation between the religious and the secular spheres is a modern creation that subverts traditional theology. Secularism has lauded itself as the basic account of reality, spawning its own secular politics, ethics, and philosophy. According to Milbank, secularism's ascendancy was neither necessary nor rationally justified. Instead, its creation was predicated on heretical and pagan ideologies that eclipsed Christian perspectives on the social sphere.

This revolutionary understanding of the Church's relation to the public sphere is just one of the many ways that radical orthodoxy attempts to rework the modern approach to Christianity.<sup>75</sup> Radical orthodoxy utilizes a vast reading of the Western philosophical tradition in order to demonstrate that the source of its "progress" was nothing more than the development of an anti-Christian theology. For Milbank, all the advances of the Western philosophical tradition since the Enlightenment are really "elaborations of a

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<sup>74</sup> I want to apologize ahead of time for any mistakes or over-generalizations I may have committed in attempting to describe radical orthodoxy as a homogenous whole through the primary texts of its main authors. As with any movement that is still in its infancy, the mature formulation of its ideas is often difficult if not impossible to anticipate. To try and avoid this difficulty, I have depended a great deal on the text *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* by James K.A. Smith, a text that, according to John Milbank, does "a remarkably good job of providing an accessible synthesis." Milbank's current foreword to the volume begins, "Authors frequently claim that they have been misread – and the world is right to react to this claim with a measure of skepticism. But in the present case, those authors associated with radical orthodoxy will surely not be able to register any such protest. Jamie Smith has done us all an immense service by presenting in clear, direct terms the central ideas, diagnoses, and projects associated with this movement."

<sup>75</sup> Radical orthodoxy was borne out of a group of scholars at Cambridge who, in the twilight of the modern era, began to recognize the poverty created by modern philosophy (James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004], 66). The founding scholars of the movement have since scattered.

single nihilistic philosophy.”<sup>76</sup> This nihilism is created by a dependence on the late medieval scholastics, especially John Duns Scotus, and on their Enlightenment successors like Immanuel Kant.<sup>77</sup> Radical orthodoxy’s solution is a complex mingling of patristic and medieval sources and reflections on the conditions revealed by postmodernity. This turn back to tradition seeks the basis of all knowledge in revelation as mediated by the historic Christian tradition, all the while realizing that the late medieval collapse of this very tradition suggests a need to critically evaluate its scholastic sources.<sup>78</sup> In opposition to postmodern relativism, radical orthodoxy uses the methods of postmodern theorists to ultimately support a Platonic understanding of Christianity.

Milbank’s critique of modernity begins with the inspiration of the radical Pietists Johann Hamann and Franz Jacobi. These Christian writers objected to the way Enlightenment philosophy overcame theology. Grounding a philosophy in presuppositions that originate outside the Christian tradition predisposes the philosophy to assert itself apart from Christianity.<sup>79</sup> In opposition to the Enlightenment tradition, Milbank finds in Hamann and Jacobi a significant reorientation. If creation is dependent on God’s revelation, then the function of reason is found within the bounds of revelation, not vice versa. Thus, Hamann and Jacobi insisted that nothing in the created world can

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<sup>76</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 278.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, 94 and “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy”, 38. Even though Kant is not a part of medieval scholasticism, radical orthodoxy claims that many of his ideas, especially the Copernican Revolution, had roots in the late scholastic period.

<sup>78</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, “Introduction,” *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1998), 2-3.

<sup>79</sup> If philosophical categories like “being” and “knowledge” are not redefined theologically, “the radical otherness of God will never be *expressible* in any way without idolatrously reducing it to our finite human categories.” (Milbank, “Knowledge: The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi,” 22).

be fully understood without reference to the infinite.<sup>80</sup> Their writings are a call to relocate the dependence on human reason within the bounds of God's revelation.

Unfortunately for modernity, most intellectuals did not heed Jacobi's and Hamann's warnings. The dependence on humanistic traditions led to a separation between secular and theological knowledge. It is this separation with which Milbank takes issue, a development he understands to be specifically Kantian. Kant divides human reasoning capabilities into two separate spheres – the empirical and the transcendental – arguing that human reason only has sufficient access to the empirical realm.<sup>81</sup> In effect, Kantian epistemology legitimizes secularism. Kant claimed that he, “found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith,” but this separation of reason and faith ended up ensuring the future success of secular perspectives.<sup>82</sup> Even though this does not deny the possibility of faith, it enables a type of humanism that treats the existence of God as inconsequential. Kant is thus credited with laying the ideological foundations for “self-sufficient humanism.”<sup>83</sup> After all, if humanity can define its own limits of knowledge and see itself as part of a realm that is

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<sup>80</sup>In this way, Hamann and Jacobi “denied the validity of the enterprises of ontology or epistemology as pure philosophical endeavors” (Milbank, “Knowledge,” 24).

<sup>81</sup>Kant argues that since human reason forms all of its concepts from empirical data, the concept of God is largely speculative and hypothetical. This essentially relegates theologians to “the realm of mere possibilities, where they hope upon the wings of ideas to draw near to the object – the object that has refused itself to all their empirical enquiries” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B658). Kant sees the concept of God as merely a postulate of practical reason, and he believes that humanity has the ability to understand morality and true religion without any recourse to revelation (Wilson, *Introduction to Modern Theology*, 32, 35).

<sup>82</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B:xxx. Just after Kant reassures the religious believer that there is no conflict between reason and belief in God, he then pardons the skeptic, maintaining that pure reason has no good theoretical reasons to affirm the existence of God (Bernstein, “The Secular-Religious Divide: Kant's Legacy,” 1038). Kant believed that belief in God is a matter of speculative practical reason.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 1041

not dependent on the concept of God, it also becomes free to treat God as irrelevant.<sup>84</sup> In Kantian philosophy, humanity declares its autonomy, not by denying that God exists, but by cutting God off from being a source of its knowledge.<sup>85</sup>

However, according to Milbank, this theological usurpation was not completely due to the ideological innovations of Kant. Instead, the problem was already latent much earlier in the philosophy of John Duns Scotus. Scotus disagreed with Aquinas's doctrine of analogy, viewing it as an inconsistency of Thomist philosophy. Aquinas claims that all of our descriptions of God can only apply to God analogically. Thus, the concepts we apply to God do not have exactly the same meaning as they do when applied to us. Scotus argues that if these concepts have a different meaning when they are applied to God, then we cannot actually have any knowledge of God. In place of this, Scotus suggests that descriptions apply *univocally* to God and creatures.<sup>86</sup> This means that any description of God applies to him in the exact same way that it applies to his creatures.

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<sup>84</sup> Philip Blond describes this secular phenomenon, explaining that God "becomes a merely 'sublime' phenomenon for a self-sufficient subject that has no genuine cognitive requirements in respect of anything external to itself" (Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, 7).

<sup>85</sup> In *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank indicates that this also enabled modern social theorists to redefine the social sphere apart from theology. He argues that "sociology extends the Kantian programme. . . in such a manner as to make theological or metaphysical explanation of the content of this finitude impossible" (76), even though the shifts that created modern social theory are "no more rationally justifiable than the Christian positions themselves" (Ibid, 1). Social theory was taken to have more explanatory power than Christianity, and theology was subjected to sociology's own standards of contingent historical constructivism. And yet, social theory now finds itself painfully aware that secularization is increasingly "paradoxical, and implies that the mythic-religious can never be left behind" (Ibid, 3). Through this awareness arises the possibility that social theory is more secure than the theology which preceded it. On the other hand, it is also possible that "'scientific' social theories are themselves theologies or anti-theologies in disguise" (Ibid, 3). According to Milbank, the masking of this tenuous situation was all bequeathed to modern social theory through Kantian philosophy, which provided the underlying foundations of the origin of sociology.

<sup>86</sup> If this is not true, then "a disconcerting consequence ensues; namely, that from the proper notion of anything found in creatures nothing at all can be inferred about God" (Cambridge Companion to John Duns Scotus, "Duns on Natural Theology," 197).

Scotus's univocal ontology is diametrically opposed to Aquinas's emphasis on analogy. For Aquinas, although God and his creatures both have being, their modes of being are different in an important sense. God exists as a first principal, as a self-sufficient being, but humans only have being that is created, received from their Creator. As a result, the being of humans can only be understood analogically through its participation in the being of its Creator.<sup>87</sup> In that sense, analogical ontology "suspends" the concept of being by placing its terminus in God, and this prevents the creation of a secular realm that exists prior to, and independent from, theology.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast, a univocal understanding of existence opens up the possibility of a separate secular space, because it frees human self-knowledge from any dependence on theological concepts. Conversely, it makes the concept of God subject to the limitations of human knowledge. Scotus's univocity thus foreshadows Kant's claim that human knowledge is limited to phenomena, that knowledge of noumena is impossible.<sup>89</sup> In effect, this flattens the realm of epistemology, insisting that knowledge of the creature and knowledge of the creator share the same limitations, and this reduces theological knowledge to anthropology. According to Catherine Pickstock, "Duns Scotus and his successors [...] opened a space for univocal treatment of finite being without regard to any theology, rational or revealed. Although this space was not immediately exploited in a secularizing fashion, in the long run this came to be the case."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Smith, 96-97.

<sup>88</sup> Milbank, "Knowledge," 23.

<sup>89</sup> Milbank, "The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy," 39.

<sup>90</sup> Catherine Pickstock, "Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 405-422.

On this point, the proponents of radical orthodoxy convincingly argue that Kantian epistemology is only possible through a post-Scotist understanding of univocity. Inherent to this argument is the contention that the intellectual developments of this period were not necessary, that the tradition could have developed in a more orthodox direction. To this end, radical orthodoxy makes use of the genealogical method. The genealogical method traces the history of ideological developments in order to identify the original circumstances in which they arose.<sup>91</sup> Here, radical orthodoxy is most indebted to postmodern philosophy. Postmodernism examines the contingent nature of historical events in order to identify the subjective elements that are often overlooked in the project of modernity, which attempts to downplay the subjectivity of truth claims.<sup>92</sup> In this case, radical orthodoxy focuses on the context of Duns Scotus's univocal ontology, suggesting that it is not rationally justified but is driven more by Scotus's subjective motivations. Daniel Bell characterizes it as "a rupture with the Thomistic *analogia entis*,"<sup>93</sup> while Catherine Pickstock describes it as "a distorted religious theory and practice."<sup>94</sup> Radical orthodoxy views the Scotist tradition of univocity as an important historical point of misdirection for the theological tradition of the Church.

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<sup>91</sup> This is quite similar to the method exercised by Foucault following Nietzsche.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Hallward, "The Singular and the Specific: Recent French Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 99 (2000): 6-7. Along similar lines, many theorists regard Nietzsche as a pre-cursor to later post-modernists. Nietzsche reads history as a series of conceptual formations that are not necessarily directed towards truth but serve to eliminate difference (Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," 877), allowing humanity to control the world in which it finds itself (Ibid, 881-882). This need for domination implicates all claims of truth as being merely political. Therefore, all ideologies are embraced through a latent authorization of the dominant interest. The Nietzschean genealogy thus radically interprets all intellectual developments as being centered on subjective human need.

<sup>93</sup> Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001), 33.

<sup>94</sup> Catherine Pickstock, "Modernity and Scholasticism: A Critique of Recent Invocations of Univocity," *Antonionum* 78 (2003): 4. This is where radical orthodoxy's affinity with genealogy comes to a close. If radical orthodoxy completely incorporated genealogy, it might emphasize the discursive formations of

However, it is not clear that Scotus's philosophy is obviously heretical. One of radical orthodoxy's central claims is that secular modernity emerged out of a perverse theology whereas Scotus's guiding concern for his univocal ontology was theological.<sup>95</sup> Milbank, however, finds that Scotus's abandonment of the metaphysical framework of Aquinas is nothing less than idolatry. For Aquinas, the being of God is primary, and the being of creatures is contingent and dependent upon the being of God. Scotus's formulation creates a world where humans are no longer secondary to God but instead can establish secure knowledge without revelation.<sup>96</sup> This move is an "idolatry towards creatures" that privileges human reason to the point that God must fit into a preconceived notion of being.<sup>97</sup> Aquinas's ambiguity keeps humanity indebted to God for the continual reconfirmation of its being whereas Scotus tries to clear up this ambiguity by empowering finite human knowledge, elevating immanent knowledge over revelation.

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Foucault. Instead, the genealogical reading utilized by radical orthodoxy might be better understood as a theological genealogy. Even as *Theology and Social Theory* sets out to demonstrate the "questionability of the assumptions upon which secular social theory rests" and to "unearth the arbitrary moments in the construction of their logic," at the same time it declares that secularism "is actually constituted in its secularity by 'heresy' in relation to orthodox Christianity." (Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3). Of course, this goes beyond what Foucault intended with his genealogical nihilism. In a true Nietzschean genealogy, there is no final resting point, for "genealogy is an endless task, because every discourse and practice always presupposes more than it can be fully aware of" (Ibid, 281). These genealogies merely wait for repudiation from another perspective. However, for radical orthodoxy, theological genealogy gains its ground in the orthodox tradition of the church, grounding its perspective and revealing all intellectual aberrations as nothing more than theological heresy.

<sup>95</sup> Scotus was claiming univocity in order to secure knowledge of God. As Pickstock mentioned earlier, even though this wasn't immediately utilized to deny knowledge of God, eventually it became a weak point that was distorted by philosophical theologians.

<sup>96</sup> Milbank states, "For insofar as Aquinas appeared to leave some ambiguity regarding how it was possible to speak of God by first speaking of finite beings, Duns Scotus resolved it in an untraditional direction by affirming that this is because one can first understand Being in an unambiguous, purely 'existential' sense, as the object of a proposition, without reference to God, who is latter claimed 'to be' in the same univocal manner" (Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44).

<sup>97</sup> Milbank, *The Word Made Strange*, 44. This idea of the reign of onto-theology is fully expounded in Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*.

Notable Approaches to Radical Orthodoxy

At this point, radical orthodoxy reaches the end of its deconstruction of modernity and begins laying out its own proposal. If Scotus's univocity of being destroyed the emphasis on creation's dependency on God, then it is imperative to adopt a perspective that preserves the suspension of theological values due to their divine origin.<sup>98</sup> For radical orthodoxy's adherents, this is found in a dynamic blend of Platonism and Christianity. In 1998, Milbank, Pickstock, and Graham Ward co-edited a collection of introductory articles entitled *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. The introduction to this work states: "The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is 'participation' as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity."<sup>99</sup> Thus, for these pioneering members of radical orthodoxy, engagement with Platonism is necessary for reviving a Thomistic theology of participation. This is the foundation and perhaps the most intriguing innovation of the radically orthodox position.

The return to a form of Platonism has several distinct advantages, most prominently, the overcoming of modern nihilism. For radical orthodoxy, reestablishing theology and morality in a Platonic framework protects them from a devaluing humanism that eventually yields to nihilism. This starts with the *imago Dei* and incarnational theology. To the extent that humanity is imagined as an image or Form of the heavenly model, it can be protected from a thoroughgoing humanism that threatens to destroy any attachment it has with the transcendent.<sup>100</sup> The same is true of many other facets of human life. According to radical orthodoxy, "only transcendence, which 'suspends' [life,

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<sup>98</sup> Milbank, Pickstock and Ward, "Introduction," 3. And Smith, 103.

<sup>99</sup> Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>100</sup> William Cavanaugh, "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies," *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1998), 184.

self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, and human political community] in the sense of interrupting them, ‘suspends’ them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth over-against the void.”<sup>101</sup> This secures the theological use of analogy and reinforces the connection between the temporal and the eternal, leaving no room for secularism, especially a nihilistic secularism that claims to have rid itself of theology.

### *Radical Orthodoxy and Evangelicals*

Of the three postmodern theological perspectives, radical orthodoxy is the least likely to be embraced by Evangelicals. Radical orthodoxy’s vision ultimately turns back to tradition, and its main exponents are either Anglican or Roman Catholic.<sup>102</sup> This dependence may immediately discourage Evangelicals from engaging with radical orthodoxy. Evangelical churches have predominantly regarded tradition with some suspicion, especially since it seems to violate the rule of Scripture, introducing traditions and doctrines to the faith which are not of biblical origin. This is a significant part of its historic disapproval of Roman Catholicism.<sup>103</sup> Despite these obstacles, Milbank insists that radical orthodoxy is not specifically a Roman Catholic theology. He claims, “Although [radical orthodoxy] can be espoused by Roman Catholics, it can equally be espoused by those who are formally ‘protestant,’ yet whose theory and practice essentially accords with the catholic vision of the Patristic period through to the high

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<sup>101</sup> Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>102</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1998), xi. Of the twelve contributors to this volume, seven are Anglicans and the other five are Roman Catholics.

<sup>103</sup> Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 114-115.

Middle Ages.”<sup>104</sup> This has kept radical orthodoxy from being completely eliminated from Protestant theological reflection. Pickstock has claimed that radical orthodoxy has found surprising conversation partners “amongst Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites, Nazarenes, and others.”<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, radical orthodoxy has had a negligible effect on Evangelical theology.

To some extent, though, Evangelical theology shares an affinity with the radical orthodox perspective. In recent years, Evangelical churches and theologians have encouraged their followers to look at the world through a biblical worldview. For Evangelicals, a viewpoint that is based ultimately on the Bible is seen as essential to living a true Christian life. Due to recent surveys that have concluded that only nine percent of born-again Christians actually have a biblical worldview, Focus on the Family has launched a teaching series dedicated to restoring essentials of the biblical faith.<sup>106</sup> This program attempts to combat modern understandings of human sufficiency as well, claiming that man is made in God’s image and needs his revelation to have complete knowledge of the world.<sup>107</sup> Evangelicalism, however, can only draw comparisons to the intellectual sophistication and thorough historical genealogy of radical orthodoxy. Whereas radical orthodoxy turns to a scrutiny of tradition in order to undermine the privileged status of the secular world, Evangelicals turn back to Scripture. Even though radical orthodoxy wants to promote a Christian worldview as well, the biblical worldview

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<sup>104</sup> John Milbank, “The Programme of Radical Orthodoxy,” *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000), 36.

<sup>105</sup> Pickstock, “Reply to David Ford and Guy Collins,” 407.

<sup>106</sup> Barna Group, “A Biblical Worldview has a Radial Effect on a Person’s Life,” 1 December 2003 [on-line]; available from <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/131-a-biblical-worldview-has-a-radical-effect-on-a-persons-life>.

<sup>107</sup> Focus on the Family, “The Truth Project,” 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://www.thetruthproject.org/events/A000000068.cfm/>.

promoted by conservative Evangelicals is merely a resurgence of emphasis on the infallibility and sufficiency of the biblical text.

## CHURCHES

### **Wicker Park Grace, Chicago, IL**

Of the three churches I visited, Wicker Park Grace in Chicago corresponded most closely with the emphases found in deconstructive theology. Wicker Park Grace is pastored by Nanette Sawyer, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and McCormick Theological Seminary. She was commissioned by the Presbyterian Church (USA) to plant a congregation in the Wicker Park neighborhood in Chicago.<sup>108</sup> The church now attracts about thirty congregants every week to its small downtown property, with about one hundred forty on the email list.<sup>109</sup> By church affiliation, Wicker Park is a descendant of a mainline tradition and readily acknowledges its participation in the Emergent Movement.<sup>110</sup> Fortunately for this study, Nanette grew up in a more conservative Christian family<sup>111</sup> and has been influenced by Emergent Evangelical authors like Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt.<sup>112</sup> Even though the church is not necessarily Post-Evangelical in terms of its main congregants (most of the members are young adults and college students from the area), Sawyer is a living example of a person who has moved from a conservative to a more Emergent approach to Christian ministry.

The “About Us” portion of the church’s website declares that it is a church that is Centered, Generous, and Dynamic. In this context, “Centered” refers to its focus on the

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<sup>108</sup> *Wicker Park Grace, About Us*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://wickerparkgrace.net/about-us/our-pastor-nanette-sawyer.html>.

<sup>109</sup> Jason Byassee, “The Church Downtown,” *The Christian Century*, 11 March 2008, 29.

<sup>110</sup> *Wicker Park Grace Partners*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://wickerparkgrace.net/about-us/partners-friends-supporters.html>.

<sup>111</sup> *Nanette Sawyer’s Blog*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://nanettesawyer.wordpress.com/spiritual-journey/my-spiritual-journey-the-beginnings/>.

<sup>112</sup> Nanette Sawyer, interview by author, digital recording, Chicago, IL, 24 November 2007.

grace of God while at the same time remaining “generous” and “dynamic” in regard to encountering neighbors and change.<sup>113</sup> According to Sawyer, the most definitive characteristic about the Wicker Park community is the diversity of people that make up its congregation. Due to its location, Wicker Park attracts young people from a wide variety of Christian backgrounds and even a wide variety of different faiths. Their Facebook page states, “Not everyone who participates in Wicker Park Grace events is a Christian, or considers themselves [sic] a follower of Jesus, and that's okay with us.”<sup>114</sup> For Sawyer, this multifaceted identity is what makes the church postmodern. “We live in a very pluralistic and interfaith world . . . [and this] raises a lot of theological questions of how we understand our own Christian faith.”<sup>115</sup>

Wicker Park has responded to this vast diversity in much the way suggested by Harvey Cox. In the midst of the city, Sawyer acknowledges that her ministry is very contextual, shaping itself to the needs of her congregants. Most of them are not regular church-goers, and the prevalence of other faiths has caused her to accommodate her ministry to a wide range of religious sensibilities.<sup>116</sup> When I attended, Sawyer was leading a series on religious neighbors, contending that Christians need to interact with other religions in order to better respect them and even learn from them. On October 3, 2010, the teaching was on the Islamic practice of prayer. The lesson summarized Islamic prayer practices before we broke into groups and discussed what we could draw from interacting with Islamic prayer practices to strengthen our own spiritual journeys. This

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<sup>113</sup> *Wicker Park Grace, About Us.*

<sup>114</sup> *Wicker Park Grace Facebook Page*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Wicker-Park-Grace-Chicago/56807790432?v=info>.

<sup>115</sup> Nanette Sawyer, interview by author, digital recording, Chicago, IL, 24 November 2007.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

closely mirrors Cox's advice to the church to formulate a concept of God that is acceptable for the secular context. Wicker Park's attempt at contextual theology includes learning from the diverse beliefs found in downtown Chicago.

The question I had for Nanette Sawyer then was how faithful Wicker Park attempts to be to its Christian heritage. Do they go as far as John Caputo and reject all systematic theology in favor of a "theology of the event?" On this point, Sawyer is somewhat conflicted. While she wants to center Wicker Park's community in the Christian tradition, she also wants to acknowledge the value of different worldviews. At one point in our interview, Sawyer said, "I do want to hold up the idea that we have a Christian narrative that shapes our lives, but I don't privilege the Christian narrative as the only true or most meaningful narrative . . . what I would resist would be saying that we need to have a biblical worldview and we need to force that on all people in the world."<sup>117</sup> For this reason, it seems that Sawyer's perspective does have a lot in common with Caputo's theology of the event, agreeing that interpretations of Christianity should not be limited by the cultural context of the biblical world. Any more relation than this would be forced since Sawyer does not acknowledge any serious interaction with either Cox or Caputo, but the deconstructive emphasis of Wicker Park's theological practice still clearly comes through.

To some extent, Wicker Park resonates with narrative theology's emphasis on a Christian community. Nanette Sawyer of Wicker Park Grace is attracted to the centering influence of the Christian community, even going as far to say that Wicker Grace attempts to build and grow in community as part of its spiritual growth. Sawyer says,

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<sup>117</sup> Nanette Sawyer, interview by author, digital recording, Chicago, IL, 24 November 2007.

“We [the Wicker Park family] have a strong emphasis on community and on an individual’s role within community but also how an individual is shaped by communal practices.”<sup>118</sup> However, as I have described, the theology of Wicker Park Grace is much closer to deconstructive Postmodernism than to any form of narrative or postliberal theology.

### **Reunion Church, Mokena, IL**

Reunion Church in Mokena, Illinois also has a slight affinity with deconstructive theology. Reunion Church, founded by Chuck Anderson, was born out of the Emergent Movement in 2001. Anderson was raised in an Evangelical family that bordered on fundamentalism. When he became a third-generation pastor, he attempted to introduce some new practices into the traditional mold, but ended up encountering significant opposition. At that point, Anderson said that it seemed better to try and start something from scratch rather than harm an already existing church for the sake of innovation.<sup>119</sup> This led to the founding of Reunion Church. Reunion summarizes its ministry by five main “Movements”: Spirituality, Beauty, Story, Mission, and Connection.<sup>120</sup> Anderson thinks that these emphases were primarily the product of Emergent influences, most notably Brian McLaren and Erwin McManus. Reunion has remained committed to these principles throughout its ten year existence even though its emphasis on the Emergent movement has diminished. Pastor Anderson says that the Emergent emphasis just does

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<sup>118</sup> Nanette Sawyer, interview by author, digital recording, Chicago, IL, 24 November 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Chuck Anderson, interview by author, digital recording, Mokena, IL, 15 December 2010.

<sup>120</sup> *Reunion Church Movements*, 20 January 2011 [on-line]; available from [http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=38&Itemid=55](http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=38&Itemid=55).

not exist anymore, that the term has been so overused that it has lost its practical significance.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Reunion remains a descendant of the Emergent movement within Evangelicalism.

When I described the deconstructive approach to postmodern theology, Pastor Anderson said that he agreed with that to some extent. On Reunion's website, its description of "Story" indicates that the individual's experiences play a prominent role in spirituality: "Reunion is a place that embraces each person's unique story as it encounters God's story, recognizing that everyone is at a different place in their spiritual journey."<sup>122</sup> For this reason, Pastor Anderson acknowledges that "different people bring different experiences to learning from the Christian community, so, to a certain extent, they should be allowed their own perspectives."<sup>123</sup> Despite these acknowledgements, Reunion seems to be much more centered on the Bible than Wicker Park Grace. In his sermon on October 2, 2010, Pastor Anderson emphasized that correct theology must be based on the entirety of Scripture instead of just select passages. Furthermore, their statement of beliefs says that the Bible "is God's completely true story about who he is, what he has done, what he is doing, and what he will do ... The Bible is the final authority on all matters to which it speaks."<sup>124</sup> This formulation seems to be much closer to an Evangelical doctrine of the authority of Scripture than Wicker Park's denial of the biblical worldview as the ultimate authority. Even though it identifies with the Emergent

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<sup>121</sup> Chuck Anderson, interview by author, digital recording, Mokena, IL, 15 December 2010.

<sup>122</sup> *Reunion Church Movements*.

<sup>123</sup> Chuck Anderson, interview by author, digital recording, Mokena, IL, 15 December 2010.

<sup>124</sup> *Reunion Church Beliefs*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from [http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=39&Itemid=54](http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=39&Itemid=54).

movement, Reunion seems to be much less affected by deconstructive approaches to theology.

Reunion Church also displays a slight affinity to narrative theology. Reunion Church has an emphasis on Connection found in the “Movements” section of its website. The core movement of “Connection” states, “At the heart Reunion is a community of faith, helping to introduce people to the life and love of Jesus Christ. We value sharing our lives in brokenness and wholeness because it showcases the grace of God in accepting us, no matter where we are or have been.”<sup>125</sup> This description makes it clear that Reunion, like Wicker Park, values the ways in which honestly interacting with a community shapes the individual. However, to the extent that Reunion maintains a much more explicit Christian confession, in its description of “Beliefs” and “Movements,” its theology seems to more closely coincide with that of the postliberals. Another of the movements valued by Reunion is “Story,” which is summarized as such:

The story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the truth that gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Reunion is a place that embraces each person’s unique story, recognizing that everyone is at a different place in their spiritual journey. We value nurturing and supporting those journeys, giving people an opportunity to see God’s story reflected in their own.<sup>126</sup>

In this Movement, story seems to be much more than a deconstructive emphasis on the disparate nature of every individual’s story. Instead, the emphasis seems to be on inviting people to play their part in God’s story. This, along with the emphasis Reunion

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<sup>125</sup> *Reunion Church Movements*, 20 January 2011 [on-line]; available from [http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=38&Itemid=55](http://reunionchurch.net/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=38&Itemid=55).

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

places on the Bible, suggests that Reunion is much closer than Wicker Park to an authentically narrative theology in which individuals are absorbed into the realistic world of Scripture.

### **Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI**

The clearest example I studied of an Evangelical community influenced by narrative theology was Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. Mars Hill was established by founding pastor, Rob Bell, in February of 1999. Prior to starting Mars Hill, Bell received his bachelor's degree from Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, and then his Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary, firmly establishing his Evangelical credentials. From there he was hired as an assistant pastor at Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At this point, Bell and his wife Kristen were inspired to attempt to create a new type of church community. According to Mars Hill's website, Rob and Kristen wanted to fulfill "the idea that church could be about desire, longing, and connection, and the dream that it be those things without fluff or hype piled on."<sup>127</sup> Due to rapid growth, the congregation moved into the abandoned Grand Village Mall and has been meeting there ever since. According to Christianity Today in 2004, Mars Hill had as many as ten thousand weekly attendees.<sup>128</sup> This Post-Evangelical community has grown out of Bell's initiative and ideas, ideas which seem to have been significantly influenced by narrative theology.

Mars Hill's current theological perspective is declared by its website to be "narrative theology." It asserts, "We believe God inspired the authors of Scripture by his

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<sup>127</sup> *Mars Hill History*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://marshill.org/history/>.

<sup>128</sup> Andy Crouch, "The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, 1 November 2004, 36.

Spirit to speak to all generations of believers, including us today. God calls us to immerse ourselves in this authoritative narrative communally and individually to faithfully interpret and live out that story today as we are led by the Spirit of God.”<sup>129</sup>

This certainly seems similar to the type of shift envisioned by Hans Frei in *Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*. The statement declares that the Bible is meant to be treated “communally” as an “authoritative narrative,” indicating both the narrative aspect of Scripture and the sufficiency of the biblical text. However, this statement alone is not enough to establish Mars Hill’s connection with the Yale School of Theology. A renewed emphasis on narrative in theology has not just been limited to the Yale school, and the views of its supporters often vary widely.<sup>130</sup> For this reason, it is necessary to assess Mars Hill’s theological influences to discover the extent to which its theology is influenced by a postmodern perspective.

Rob Bell’s approach to Scripture seems to be influenced by several postliberal concerns. He outlines his approach to biblical authority in his first major work, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*. Instead of locating Scriptural authority in its correspondence to an objective reality, Bell says the Bible has the authority it does because “The Bible is a collection of stories that teach us about what it looks like when God is at work through actual people. The Bible has the authority it does only because it contains stories about people interacting with the God who has all authority.”<sup>131</sup> The Bible gains its authority due to its narrative, not propositional nature. Bell is also careful

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<sup>129</sup> *Mars Hill Beliefs*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://marshill.org/believe/>

<sup>130</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 2.

<sup>131</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 65.

to affirm the role of the church in the canonization of Scripture.<sup>132</sup> This communal narrative approach certainly resembles the approach taken by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.

Strangely, when I visited Mars Hill, I discovered that its theological perspective has no direct connection to either Frei or Lindbeck. Instead, much of its understanding of narrative comes from the influence of N. T. Wright.<sup>133</sup> In *Velvet Elvis*, Bell rejects the notion of using the Bible as an owner's manual and instead says that the Bible should be approached as "the wild, uncensored passionate account it is of people experiencing the living God."<sup>134</sup> On this point, it seems that Bell's perspective on Scripture is due in large part to Wright's lecture, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" calling it "the best thing I have ever read about the Bible."<sup>135</sup> In this article, Wright gives his own perspective on why the Bible should be understood as authoritative. According to Wright, Evangelicals live by a strange sort of biblical positivism, assuming that they "reading the text straight" without any presuppositions.<sup>136</sup> From there, Wright moves through different approaches to the Bible including: 1) treating it as an absolute rule book, 2) abstracting principles from it, and 3) reading it as an authoritative historical account. Wright finds each of these lacking in some way. He contends that Scripture should be primarily understood as an authoritative narrative that requires faithful adaptation in our current situations.<sup>137</sup> He develops this idea further in his book, *The Last Word*, arguing that the Bible should be understood as portraying "Five Acts," like in a play. These acts include "Creation,"

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>133</sup> Matt Krick, interview by author, digital recording, Granville, MI, 14 November 2010.

<sup>134</sup> Bell, 63.

<sup>135</sup> Bell, 63, note 58.

<sup>136</sup> N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21(1991): 9.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 18-19.

"Fall," "Israel," "Jesus," and "The Church."<sup>138</sup> It is in this current act that Christians must model their behavior while still remaining faithful to the earlier times God interacted with humanity. Mars Hill's narrative theology class, an important part of church membership, follows the five-act hermeneutic of Wright.<sup>139</sup> Links are provided to Wright's article, and a list of other works by Wright is offered as suggested reading.<sup>140</sup> From these examples, it is clear that Wright has significantly influenced Mars Hill's view of biblical authority and its use of Scripture.

In Wright's work, it is possible to discern a connection between his vision of narrative theology and that espoused by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Wright's five-act proposal originated in his work, *The New Testament and the People of God*.<sup>141</sup> In this book, he cites Frei multiple times and proposes that "instead of translating narrative into something else, we are now urged to read it as it is and understand it in its own terms." This is due to the fact that narrative is both a formative source of knowledge and a sufficient way of treating the biblical texts.<sup>142</sup>

These statements reflect similarities between the thought of Wright and the postliberal school, and this indicates some connections between the two, connections that may have influenced Rob Bell and Mars Hill's theology. Nevertheless, these connections are weak and, as such, are negligible. They certainly do not legitimate classifying Mars

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<sup>138</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 121.

<sup>139</sup> *Mars Hill Theology Class Bibliography*, 30 January 2011 [on-line]; available from <http://marshill.org/pdf/study/narrativeTheologyClassBibliography.pdf>.

<sup>140</sup> [http://www.marshill.org/pdf/HOW\\_CAN\\_THE\\_BIBLE\\_BE\\_AUTHORITATIVE.pdf](http://www.marshill.org/pdf/HOW_CAN_THE_BIBLE_BE_AUTHORITATIVE.pdf)

<sup>141</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 121. Wright indicates that in *The Last Word* he is merely drawing from the work he did in *The New Testament and the People of God*.

<sup>142</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 38-43, 47.

Hill as a postliberal community. At most, Mars Hill embraces principles characteristic of Yale narrative theology. The significant elements I have analyzed are as follows:

### **1. The authority of the Bible displayed through its “narrative” structure**

As I stated earlier, Mars Hill and its leader Rob Bell view the authority of Scripture as principally resting in its use as narrative. This is evidenced in the church’s statement of faith, in its training materials, and in Bell’s published works. This authority is defined over and against Biblicist proof-texting as well as the critical devaluation of the text, as seen in the Yale school.

### **2. Theological practice as a reflection on and reliving of these narratives**

Rob Bell’s preaching style puts a large emphasis on teaching the entire narrative of Scripture. When he first started Mars Hill Bible Church, his first sermon series was on the book of Leviticus!<sup>143</sup> From what I have observed, his preaching has moved in a narrative progression, introducing the biblical passage, working his way through the narrative, and letting the application flow directly from imagining participation within that narrative world. While that might not be enough to differentiate a narrative style of preaching from a merely exegetical one, Bell’s overall focus is always on the “New Exodus” theme he articulates in his book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Crouch, 36.

<sup>144</sup> Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

### **3. Doctrines which serve as community regulations**

There is significant similarity between Bell's teaching and Lindbeck's portrayal of doctrines as community regulations. In the first chapter of *Velvet Elvis*, Bell compares church doctrines to "springs" instead of "bricks." He claims that too many Christian communities have treated their sacred doctrines as bricks to be built up in a wall of rationality. This doctrinal emphasis, however, tends to stagnate a church and downplay the significance of living within a community shaped by the beliefs of the Christian community.<sup>145</sup> Bell's suggestion is that doctrines should be treated more like springs on a trampoline, as a means to an end, as "statements and beliefs about our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing in our jumping."<sup>146</sup> This comes much closer to a postliberal understanding of church doctrines as community regulations. As the church is shaped by the biblical narrative, it enacts its doctrines as a natural part of being pulled into the biblical story. Doctrines are then an articulation of this new life, but by no means are they the completion of it. There is no evidence that Bell was influenced by the postliberalism of Frei and Lindbeck in his discussion of springs and bricks, but there does seem to be a good deal of correlation between the postliberal and Mars Hill views of church doctrine.

### **4. A non-correlative, ad hoc approach to apologetics**

Since Mars Hill is only one church community and is not directly affiliated with a university, apologetic works of precision and depth are not integral parts of their published literature. However, Rob Bell does give a perspective in *Velvet Elvis* that

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<sup>145</sup> Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 27

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

could define the whole Mars Hill congregation. Bell argues that you rarely defend the people you love and admire. You do not engage in polemics to try and convince others that your love is worthy of their affection. Instead, you invite them to meet the person and let them decide for themselves.<sup>147</sup> Bell says that he is much more interested in living the Christian life than arguing about correct doctrine, a stance that could be Mars Hill's apologetic as well.

From this analysis, it seems clear that Mars Hill can be classified as a good representative of a postmodern Christian community shaped by narrative theology. Even if the community does not approach the academic rigor and reflection of the original program of postliberalism, many of its core qualities are embodied in a pastoral setting at Mars Hill.

### **Radical Orthodoxy and Post-Evangelical Churches**

Similar to Evangelicals in general, the postmodern congregations I evaluated found little of value in radical orthodoxy. As noted earlier, Nanette Sawyer said that she “would resist saying that we need to have a biblical worldview and we need to force that on all people in the world.”<sup>148</sup> This may be more of a response to conservative Evangelicalism than to radical orthodoxy. Nevertheless, this seems to be a rejection of a perspective centered in the Christian tradition. Furthermore, Sawyer did not even agree with the radical orthodox claim that the secular world had been cleansed of spiritual significance. She said that she did not “buy the whole secular/religious divide. I don't

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>148</sup> Nanette Sawyer, interview with author, digital recording, Chicago, IL, 24 November 2010.

think that the religious purview or area has ever been separate from the secular world, because every person lives in the secular world and the religious world, too.”<sup>149</sup> Even though this agrees with radical orthodoxy to some extent, Sawyer did not criticize secularism the same way radical orthodoxy does. Radical orthodoxy would seem to agree that all of a person’s life is religious instead of some portions being merely secular, but the key is that these aspects are *veiled* by a current idolatrous intellectual state of affairs. Even though Sawyer agrees with radical orthodoxy on the first point, it does not seem like this is based in a critique of the Enlightenment tradition of autonomous human reason. Reunion Church also does not seem to be affected by radical orthodoxy. When I defined the three types of postmodern theology I was studying, Pastor Anderson did not even comment on radical orthodoxy, focusing instead on just the first two.<sup>150</sup> To some extent, Mars Hill might be congenial to a radically orthodox perspective with its emphasis on the unfolding of Christian history, but a close reading of its teaching materials and Rob Bell’s publications reveals no significant link between the two.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Chuck Anderson, interview by author, digital recording, Mokena, IL, 15 December 2010.

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## APPENDICES

### **Interview with Pastor Nanette Sawyer, November 24, 2010**

**Wes:** Your website says that you minister with a postmodern approach. What postmodern ideas would you say have influenced your church's ministry or theology?

**Nanette:** The thing that comes to mind is having an awareness of a very great diversity of people interacting. We're not part of an era where everyone goes to church and shares a core of common understanding. So people come with many very different understandings, more or less understanding, people who come with a multiplicity of identities, identifying maybe as having been born or raised Christian but then having renounced it or been wounded by it. We have interfaith couples who come, which is very different ministering to them and being with them than being with just Christian couples. You have to deal with all those complex interactions of different kinds of people who are living it in their day-to-day lives. So I would say complexity of identity is one of the postmodern ideas I think about a lot and that is related to the fact that we live in a very pluralistic and interfaith world. It raises a lot of theological questions of how we understand our own Christian faith and how that impacts other people.

**Wes:** What do you think is the source of this idea, this trying to blend all these different cultures together in one ministry? Is there any particular source or author that has impacted you in this way?

**Nanette:** Primarily my source is the city. I'm a very contextual pastor and I've been learning how to be a pastor in this setting. This is also my first call as a pastor and the first time I've been a pastor in a community. So in many ways I've been shaped and formed by the people I encounter here. I think that is one characteristic of the Emergent church is that it emerges out of its context. And I think that most churches are contextual. Everything is contextual. I think that awareness is postmodern also. I didn't come here with ideas. I was sent by the presbytery to be in relationship with people who weren't coming to church, particularly young adults. And it's more than young adults. Now I've come to learn that things are changing in our culture and people of all ages including young people have only known this postmodern era so it's from responding to them as a pastor that many of my ideas have emerged. Now, finding myself in that context of ministry I've had to look for other pastors and thinkers dealing with these things and I've definitely learned a lot from those relationships and the connections I've formed. Brian McLaren, from the more Evangelical stream of things. Marcus Borg has been helpful to me coming from the more mainline Protestant emerging tradition. Then other practitioners like Nadia Boltz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor in Denver, Colorado with

House for all Sinners and Saints. Doug Pagitt at Solomon's porch in Minneapolis. Russell Rathbun and Debbie Blue at House of Mercy in Minneapolis. Those are some of my key thinking partners.

**Wes:** To what extent would you embrace and affirm this diversity you have found in the city and to what extent would you want to try to bring the diversity within a single Christian tradition?

**Nanette:** I would see it as an impossible task to try to create a unified Christian faith. I don't think that Christianity has ever been unified actually. I think that in certain places, regions, and times there has been an illusion of unity but I think that people always have a diversity of understandings when it gets right down to how they practice their faith. I certainly want to however, present Christian centered teachings and develop common language and common practice which I think leads us towards some greater unity. But I primarily want to invite people who have felt disenfranchised from Christianity to be a part of the dynamic conversation Christianity is. So one of our phrases or mottos we use a lot at Wicker Park Grace is, "We are a community centered in a generous and dynamic Christianity." By center it means we focus on Christian teachings there at the core but we don't focus on our boundary. We say we have a centering of Christianity but everyone is welcome. Atheists are welcome, people from other religions are welcome, people seeking reconnection with the Christianity of their childhood are welcome. So it's not about in or out. Everyone come learn and Christianity is the center around which we gather. We strive to be generous in thought as well as hospitality, eating together, but also welcoming a diversity of thinking and knowing that we can grow by engaging with people who differ from us. And there is a kind of generosity by being with people who differ from us. There is a development of us that happens there. So it is dynamic because Christianity has always been a dynamic conversation, and sometimes an argument since the beginning of Christianity.

**Wes:** Alright. Now I'll give you my perspective on postmodern theology. Part of my project is to evaluate how much academic postmodern theology is influencing grassroots practice. My literature review is of those academic theologies. I've divided into three main categories which I think is a good overview of postmodern theology.

The first one is deconstructive theology. I've traced that through literary theorists who say that there is no one central interpretation to a text and then Jean Francois Lyotard, in his book the postmodern condition, points out that all of our knowledge of the world is actually rooted in some type of narrative. So if you tell a story about how science is the savior of mankind, that will encourage you to engage in the particular scientific practice of your community. So to some extent, even science depends on narrative developments, and there is no truth besides that. And if you say that everyone can interpret a text

differently, that quickly goes to everyone can interpret the world differently as well. Since all knowledge for humans is somewhat narrative, that leads to a wide diversity of approaches to life and practice without any central truth, without science even being able to claim, "You have to do it THIS way." A person who has applied this specifically to theology is John Caputo. He is a Derridean scholar, and he has done a lot of work with a general approach of a "theology of the event." By the 'theology of the event' he means that we can keep talking about this Christ event, we can keep representing it and telling people about it but we can't necessarily attach any sort of dogma to it because ultimately the way people perceive it is going to be determined by their own personal narrative and how they come in contact with it. So in this theology you can keep promoting the theology of the event in your own language but its' not going to have highly ramified dogma.

Second is radical orthodoxy. This began as an Anglican movement but it's starting to have an effect in America as well. This is a movement that says back in the medieval era, when there was a separation between secular and theological knowledge, this has led to our current situation where it is thought that some knowledge is purely secular whereas some is just theological. Their problem with that then is that we develop secular definitions of things that are then posed as the sure way of thinking about a thing. This theology is postmodern then when it uses the genealogical approach of Nietzsche or Foucault to say that these definitions have been created by certain historical circumstances and by no means should they be taken as obvious the way the secular realm is sometimes understood. So their perspective says that we should go back to the Christian tradition, to the Church Fathers, and to Scripture to see how they developed their ideas back then and we should still center our ideas around that today and continue to work on our definitions from there. Obviously the Anglican Church is a little more traditional and a bit more connected to church tradition than many American churches are. So when Evangelicals encounter this they think that if they lose their interpretation of the Bible everything falls apart while these theologians aren't necessarily worried about that since they are more connected to tradition.

Third is narrative theology. This was developed at Yale by George Lindbeck and Hans Frei and it is still having an effect, particularly for authors like N. T. Wright. The basic premise of narrative theology is the same as the first in that all knowledge is narratively formed, but where deconstructive theology has an emphasis on the individual, narrative theology has an emphasis on the community. They think that however the Christian community came to use and depend on words, then we can depend on them the same way. I think that would agree with radical orthodoxy in that we have gone along too much with the secular world. To be genuinely dependent on the way that language has developed within the Christian tradition, we can't take their boundaries as our boundaries. This goes along with Wittgenstein's view that everyday language part of

language games, language only forms within a community. So narrative theology is the most attractive to Evangelicals in particular because they can still keep an emphasis on the Bible and how that's formed our language. These are the three I'm working with.

Does anything in these three sound like a fair representation of a few postmodern theologies?

*Nanette:* I find them very interesting even though I haven't read a lot of those authors, even though I am a little familiar with the ideas. For the second one, I don't really buy the whole secular/religious divide. I don't think that the religious purview or area has ever been separate from the secular world, because every person lives in the secular world and the religious world too. I definitely do resonate with a great degree of diversity and individual emphasis but I also resonate with the idea that meaning is formed in community. Here at Wicker Park Grace we have an emphasis on practice. Practice includes reflection and study and learning but it also includes sharing meals together. It involves learning to stretch beyond our comfort zone so that we can be more present with people we encounter so we can invite them to engage with us emotionally as well as intellectually through the things that we discuss. Reflecting on how Wicker Park Grace interacts with these there are bits of each in a sense. We have a strong emphasis on community and on an individual's role within community but also how an individual is shaped by communal practices. It's a two-directional relationship between the individual and the community.

*Wes:* Okay, so I hear you saying that you identify with narrative theology in that the individual is influenced by the community but then you also resonate with the deconstructive theology in that there's a large amount of diversity in coming to learning about Scripture and learning about Jesus in particular.

*Nanette:* Yes, yes.

*Wes:* Do you think that any part of these ideas is particularly threatening or dangerous for the church?

*Nanette:* Well I didn't quite understand everything about the Anglican radical orthodoxy that you were talking about...

*Wes:* Alright, well let me go back to that. They do see a divide between the religious and secular, but not because there isn't regular, everyday religious life but because the secular has been cleansed of the religious because people were assured they didn't necessarily need religious knowledge. Secular knowledge is just knowledge then that everyone had access to.

*Nanette:* So I think that maybe this reflects the modern period where the West began to privilege rationality and rational thinking over myth and narrative thinking, saying those are somewhat imaginary perhaps. So we, in the modern period tended to devalue narrative meaning creation and privilege our idea of an objective assessment of reality.

*Wes:* And then what they're saying is that with the precedent of the narrative or the precedent of certain particular knowledge, we need to develop specifically out of a Christian perspective erasing the effects of the split between secular and religious knowledge. It's quite an academic movement though so at many points it can become quite confusing. Even so I chose it because of its resonance with an emphasis on a biblical worldview and the perspective that we need to let our perspective be shaped by Christian sources.

*Nanette:* My response would be that I see a value in being shaped by a tradition and I do want to hold up the idea that we have a Christian narrative that shapes our lives, but I don't privilege the Christian narrative as the only true or the most meaningful narrative. I think it is a very important one, worthy of value and it is my own and so I want to foster and develop and share it for its beauty and undermine the negative ways it has been used to cause harm and create oppression and suffering in the world. That's another reason I don't want to forfeit it because I don't want to forfeit it to those versions which I see as harmful. So I want to be part of creating this positive worldview centered in the Christian ethos. But I think that is in relation to honoring other beautiful worldviews, other shaping visions of the world. So what I would resist would be saying that we need to have a biblical worldview and we need to force that on all people in the world. I think we can have beauty and honor beauty that we see in other places and in other forms.

*Wes:* Now this question I think I already know the answer to, so however you want to elaborate on it ... Do you think that postmodernism will revitalize or threaten the church? Obviously since you pastor a church like this that in the end you think this is going to be a bad thing, but in what ways do you see postmodernism revitalizing the church?

*Nanette:* It's funny. I don't see postmodernism as the cause of either, either our growth or demise. I see postmodernism as the situation in which we find ourselves and then we have to choose how we have to live in this age. I think in order for the church to thrive we need to find a way to carry it forward with depth and beauty and meaning which is both rational and ethical but also mystical and creative. I don't think we need to push away secularism or rationality or science but we should rather engage it and find ourselves challenged and expanded by that.

## **Interview with Pastor Chuck Anderson, December 15, 2010**

**Wes:** Your website says that you try to minister to a postmodern culture with your church and with your ministry in general, and I was wondering what postmodern ideas would you say have influenced your church's ministry and your theology?

**Chuck:** We've been doing this for nine years now and so some of the things that we started doing here have changed a little bit, but when we first started in 2001 there was a big wave of postmodern/Emergent threads moving through the church world. The things that we picked up on and that we've incorporated became what we would call our five movements; those are the five emphases I think we pulled from the whole postmodern/Emerging movement.

1. Spirituality and the idea that everyone is a spiritual person. Not necessarily that everyone is a Christian but that everyone is spiritual and they are looking.
2. Beauty. There's beauty in the world and everyone's trying to draw from it.
3. Story. Everybody has a story.
4. Mission. Everyone has a reason for being here.
5. I think the last one was community and an emphasis on being together.

So in terms of what I think I drew from what I was reading at the time I think those were like the big five. Things that sort of wove their way into the fabric of who we are.

**Wes:** Now those things are on your website?

**Chuck:** Yeah those things are on our website. They went along with our theology, which we tried to keep pretty simple but we said that you know those five would be evident somehow.

**Wes:** You said that in your own personal reading those are some things you had come across. Now do you think you could identify and authors or sources these ideas came from, either for you personally or for your church in general?

**Chuck:** In terms of myself, in actual theology, Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian* and then the subsequent volume. That really got me thinking quite a bit. Then in terms of what we were actually doing, how we were actually doing church, Erwin McManus, from Mosaic California was a huge influence. We met several times and had some phone conversations. We were part of the original Mosaic Alliance that they had started back around 2000. And so he was a really big influence. He wrote a book that the entire leadership team read and we based a lot on Erwin's ideas there, there was a real kindred spirit there. So a lot of what they were doing we tried to mirror. Another big influence was Rob Bell later after the fact, after we had been doing what we had been

doing we tapped into where he was at. Mosaic very much has an emphasis on incorporating art, and that was a really big thing for me personally but then also for the church as well. We had art galleries and tried to make every week a visual type of experience. That another big thing we got from Mosaic.

**Wes:** To what extent would you say that you embrace postmodernism, or is there anything that you are less willing to embrace? Is there anything that has worried you that you have seen in these authors and ideas?

**Chuck:** Here's a little hint of my background. I'm a third-generation pastor and a sixth generation Christian, about as far back as we can go. There's a pretty heavy family history of Christianity and theology. I grew up in a conservative Baptist church with a very conservative upbringing. And so a lot of this reading was just on my own interest and initiative beyond what I was familiar with. So I had a pretty strong background that as I was reading would make me question what I grew up with or I would think, "Wow, I know where you're coming from but I don't really want to take that leap right now." Maybe with McLaren, he takes a far more universal approach to Christianity than I may be comfortable with.

We don't really even go by Emergent anymore though. The word "Emergent" just isn't really used in my circles anymore. I just don't hear it. It seems like the only time it comes up is when someone is attacking it, but it isn't clear what they are attacking anymore because the term just isn't used.

So for the most part I don't think I disagreed a lot with what was being said. I think a lot of these guys were just saying things and catching them in different ways rather than changing Christianity altogether. I think some kind of people jumped the gun by saying, "Well you're just trying to make everything brand new," while others would respond, "No not really. They're just saying things in different ways that you might not be comfortable with." It just never seemed as jarring to me as it did to others.

**Wes:** My research project is analyzing how postmodernism is affecting the Evangelical church. My method hasn't been to go to Evangelical churches and see if they are postmodern, it has been to go to churches that claim to have a postmodern approach to ministry and then to see if those churches are coming from an Evangelical background. Now that doesn't seem like an unfair characterization of your situation. Would you say that you've come from an Evangelical background or been influenced in the past by Evangelical thought?

**Chuck:** I would definitely say that I came from an Evangelical background that bordered on Fundamentalism. It wasn't off-the-charts rigid but it definitely leaned more towards fundamentalism. I guess my experience in church was first an attempt to try and do the

things that had been done in my upbringing but then found that there was such a resistance to it that it seemed easier for me to walk away from it and start something new instead of incorporating something new into something that was already existing. I know that a lot of people have a lot of different stories as far as that goes but personally I just wasn't willing to blow things wide open for the sake of trying something new, so for me it was better to just walk away and start something from scratch than to try to put new wine into old wineskins. I know there are a lot of places out there that have a mix. They'll have a more contemporary service for the younger generation and they'll kind of have a mix, and that's great if it works but that just wasn't my experience.

**Wes:** Now I want to give you a brief synopsis of my perspective, and then you can share how your experiences relate to that. So far, I've been coming at postmodern theology from an academic perspective because I think that's where it originated, and then I am trying to see how that has influenced postmodern Christian communities. So in postmodern theology I have found three main emphases and I'm going to call these narrative, deconstructive, and radical orthodoxy.

Now narrative theology is an emphasis on the fact that all language originates different communities. So language that developed in the Christian community can't necessarily be used to describe a different community because that's not where it originated. It developed within the Christian tradition. It incorporates Wittgenstein's theory of language games and how a person has to be immersed in the way language works in different communities. So the main thought of this strain is that yes we need to be more inclusive and welcoming to a wide variety of people, but at the same time we need to stay faithful to language that has been used in the Christian tradition because that is what we have to describe the Christian experience. Some of the main supporters of this way of thinking would be George Lindbeck, Hans Frei, and perhaps even N. T. Wright. They would say that instead of the church accommodating to the secular world, we should continue to communicate the gospel in a way that's explicitly Christian.

Deconstructive theology is a result of radical individualism. It would say that everyone has a different perspective on God, that everyone has different experiences, different church experiences and different life experiences. So ultimately no one can say what a person should believe about God. You can tell people about the Jesus story, but you can't ever say there is a set dogma or certain set of doctrines that you can tell someone to believe about God. It goes along with how there are many ways to interpret a literary work. There are also many ways you can interpret the life and death of Christ and so deconstructive theology supports leaving that wide open for the individual while still remembering that Christ existed and that he was an influential person.

Now the last one is radical orthodoxy and this would say that during the Enlightenment, people came to depend on reason in a way that was unfair and even a twisting of earlier theological perspectives. So they understand the secular world and a lot of philosophies as being a completely new religion and faith in reason. They are 'radical' to the extent that they criticize the modern secular realm and claim that those ideologies are pagan and against Christianity from the beginning, but at the same time they want to get back to orthodoxy and say that this is the tradition. This is the way it was laid down and the way we should accept it. People who support this view are mainly Anglican and Catholic, which I'm sure wasn't difficult to guess.

Of these three perspectives, I was wondering if your approach identified more with one than with another or if you're perspective on postmodernism and Christianity has interacted with one more than another.

**Chuck:** As you've described them, if there was a Venn diagram of the first two, then I would find myself someplace in the middle. I do believe that communities of faith definitely have different languages and words and nuances that are unique to each one, so the idea that something could just transfer right across the board to another town or state or country, I just don't see how that could possibly work. Also in the second one where the same thing applies to more ideas and to more actual theology I think I would agree to a certain extent with that too. You know, some cultural things translate.

I think what tends to happen when you're doing the academic aspect, you're asking a lot of questions that don't really get asked of me in the actual ministry setting anymore. So it's almost like you find yourself moving away from all the academic questions and when a guy calls you up and says, "I just lost my job," we can call it whatever we want to call it while this guy is just trying to pay his bills. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm pretty rusty on all of this stuff and, "Oh crap, I really haven't read that in a long time," and I'm thinking that I really haven't versed myself in a lot of it. But at the same time it's absolutely important because it works its way down from academia to the common places where people are living.

But anyways, to answer your question, I would probably find myself somewhere in between those first two, probably pulling chunks out of both of them. You know, the last part not so much, even though I definitely grew up in a home and environment of Evangelical Christianity that I definitely do believe in and to which I need to stay attached, but the question is how do we communicate, how do we verbalize them, how do we get them across to people.

**Wes:** Just to reiterate, you said that you agreed with narrative theology to the extent that we need to be faithful to specifically Christian language from the Christian community, but also you identified with the deconstructive portion, that different people bring

different experiences to learning from the Christian community so to a certain extent they should be allowed their own perspective or their own way of viewing Jesus' activity in their lives.

**Chuck:** Right, right.

**Wes:** Okay. I have two more questions. First of all, is there anything that bothers you, or do you have any concerns about these particular theologies? Do you think that any of them are headed in the wrong direction or even a dangerous direction?

**Chuck:** You know the only thing that I remember back a number of years ago, reading a lot of Francis Schaeffer, back in the 70s and 80s when a lot of his stuff was coming out, I think he expressed some concerns. I remember someone once commenting on Francis Schaeffer and his theology and saying he was very, very good at deconstructing or taking something apart, but maybe didn't live long enough or maybe wasn't so good at reconstructing something to put in its place. I really like to cook, and I just love the aspect of constructing and taking all the components and making something entirely different out of it. But it still can have a similar taste. And I'm all for that, except sometimes my concern is, "Is something being built back in its place?" that people can hold onto and say, "Okay, this makes sense to me," or is it going to be, "Okay, we just deconstructed everything, that language means something entirely different to everyone, but now we don't even know the language we are all talking about." If I had a concern it would be that. I guess I'm still linear enough, even with all of my talk about narrative, that there's got to be some base at some level.

**Wes:** Do you think that postmodernism has the chance more to move away from Evangelicalism or to revitalize Evangelicalism and give it new life?

**Chuck:** I definitely think it could revitalize it. It could be a breath of fresh air, if for no other reason than it forces people to ask questions, which in my opinion is always good. When any person or church is forced to ask, "What am I saying, why am I saying it, and do I really believe what I'm saying?" Anytime we're forced to do that I think it's great. If people could just take a little bit of their bite out of the arguments and the personal attacks, which happen at times, and just really start listening I think it would be tremendous and a great wind of fresh air. It's the way we're going to listen to each other.

### **Interview with Pastor Matt Krick, November 14, 2010**

My conversation with Matt did not take the format of a formal interview. Instead, I was able to discuss with him briefly things I had read or heard about Mars Hill. I spoke

with Matt primarily because when I introduced myself to Rob Bell and inquired about more details concerning the specific brand of narrative theology to which Mars Hill currently ascribes, he pointed me in Matt's direction. Matt identified himself as an adjunct professor at Cornerstone University and a pastor at Mars Hill, primarily responsible for organizing evening teaching series. Matt said that he had been with Mars Hill since near its inception and that his perspectives had played a formative role in the establishing of Mars Hill's theology. I asked him whether the narrative theology that Mars Hill claimed to follow was due to the influence of either Hans Frei or George Lindbeck. Matt actually had not heard of either of those theologians, but told me that Mars Hill's narrative perspective was primarily drawn from N. T. Wright. This was the extent of our conversation concerning information of interest to my research project.