

**TOWARD REESTABLISHING A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW
IN A POSTMODERN AGE**

by

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SUMMARY:

This work is comprised of an Introduction and two Parts. Part One treats, by way of historical review and evaluation, the disestablishment of the Christian worldview in a postmodern age. Part Two proposes the means by which the Christian worldview might be reestablished. The reestablishment includes the use of some of the benefits of postmodernism by Christians as well as a return to the responsible reading of texts, especially the biblical text.

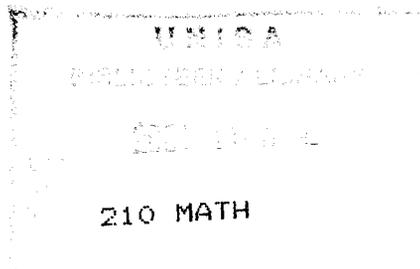
Part One, *The Disestablishment of the Christian Worldview*, is composed of three chapters. Chapter 1 chronicles the change that has occurred in Western culture because of the ascendancy of postmodernism. It is best described as a change in authority from the logocentric metanarrative which has characterized Christianity to the deconstructionist rejection of worldviews by postmodern literary critics. Chapter 2 reviews the paradigm shifts that have occurred in belief systems that have occurred in the West as a result of this change, and Chapter 3 shows the effects of all this in the culture's principal institutions.

Part Two, *The Reestablishment of the Christian Worldview*, is also composed of three chapters. Chapter 4 shows the impact that postmodernity has had on the efforts now being made on behalf of reestablishing the Christian worldview as a viable intellectual position in Western culture. Chapter 5 is occupied with the negative and positive responses of certain Christian scholars to the challenge of postmodernism, and Chapter 6 closes the study with an extended treatment of the factors that must be in play for a reestablishment of the Christian worldview to occur in Western civilization.

Key terms:

Worldviews; Postmodernism; Modernity; Christianity; Theology; Objective truth; Literary theory; Literary criticism; Responsible Reading; Hermeneutics; Reader Response; Interpretation; Linguistics; Logocentrism; Metanarratives; Foundationalism; Antifoundationalism; Deconstructionism; Universities; Political Correctness; Ethics; Social constructs; Historical Criticism; Pluralism; Multiculturalism; Reality; and Cultural change

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Introduction

The nature and purpose of this study concerns the Christian worldview and the effect that postmodernism has had upon it both negatively and positively. It assumes both a tension and a rapprochement between the respective positions of Christianity and postmodernism. The rapprochement occurs when each is able to find common ground in ideological matters. The tension exists because worldviews are decidedly not acceptable to postmoderns since they are based on metanarratives, that is, upon community based *grand narratives* which are deemed faithful renditions of universal truth.

However, since no community has a grander or more all encompassing story (or narrative) to tell than Christianity, it is clear that metanarrative is *essential* to it. For instance, in magnificent scope and sweep, Christianity begins with the creation of the universe and ends with the eschaton thus covering the most universal of all truth claims. Its metanarrative impressively gained widespread credibility in Western culture from premodern to modern times even though it was only one among the many that have been told. Moreover, although secularism, which later emerged out of modernity, eventually pushed that metanarrative to the periphery of intellectual respectability, it was still considered a plausible way of viewing reality up until the middle of the twentieth century. With the coming of postmodernism, however, all metanarratives, including the Christian version, have been virtually assigned to intellectual oblivion. As literary critic Lyotard has put it, "Postmodernism is incredulous toward [all NLM] metanarratives" (Sire 1997: 174).

The main reason that postmodernists insist that metanarratives, such as that of Christianity, have no credibility is because, in their view, they are predicated on some group's notion of reality. Postmodernists insist that such a notion is preposterous because reality is unknowable (some would even say, nonexistent), and, therefore, what passes for it is merely a

noetic construct of individuals and communities. Furthermore, postmodernism maintains that one community's "reality" has no more validity than any other's. It is in this context that Christianity must set forth its truth claims and seek a respectful hearing.

Consequently, this is a work about reality and meaning, that is, about what is real and what that means. For instance, is reality just the "collective hunch" of postmodern communities (Phillips and Okholm 1995: 132), or a synonym for the objective order of things that do exist — of things that are authentic — and therefore substantive in nature? After all, is not reality what most persons and groups profess to see when they look at the external world through the prism of their worldviews? Admittedly, this is problematic because what one claims to see, while it may be objectively there, is not being viewed with unalloyed, pure, or even disinterested perception. Hence, while worldviews are not "collective hunches," as some postmodernists insist, they are nonetheless necessarily flawed in perspective since it is finite and imperfect human beings who hold them. Accordingly, worldviews function best when understood as flexible, not fixed. It is thus that they are subject to adjustment, perhaps even revision, as the perceptions of what is deemed to be objective reality (that which is really there) are interpreted and evaluated.

It is in this context of the *limited* nature of worldviews that Arthur Holmes sets forth a summary of the main criteria for the "intellectual framework that merits being called a worldview"(1985: 17). Those criteria are as follows: "1) It has a *wholistic* goal, trying to see every area of life and thought in an integrated fashion, 2) It is a *perspectival* approach, coming at things from a previously adopted point of view which now provides an integrative framework, 3) It is an *explanatory* process, probing the relationship of one area after another to the unifying perspective, 4) It is *pluralistic* in that the same basic perspective can be articulated in somewhat different ways, and 5) It has *action outcomes*, for what we think and what we value guide what we will do" (Holmes 1985: 17).

A worldview, then, is a set of core beliefs held by individuals and communities that serves as

a defining rationale for discerning why things are the way they are. As such, worldviews “function as interpretative conceptual schemes to explain why we ‘see’ the world as we do, why we think and act as we do” (Nash 1992: 33). Though postmodernists reject worldviews — claiming that those who hold them inevitably use them as a means for convincing others that they have “got it absolutely right [that is, that they have gained knowledge, meaning, and truth_{NLM}]” (Vanhoozer 1998: 101) — it is highly unlikely that anyone, after all, really functions without one. The question for those who do not think as do the postmodernists, then, is not whether one should have a worldview, but whether the one he or she has can serve as an *adequate* framework for thought and action. Thus, Noebel thinks that the term *worldview* “refers to *any* ideology, philosophy, theology, movement, or religion that provides an overarching approach to understanding God, the world, and man’s relations to God and the world” (1991: 8).

Palmer provides a helpful summary of the way a worldview functions in a person’s life to provide unity for his or her thoughts on reality. He writes:

The beliefs in a worldview hang together, cohere in a certain way . . . [Thus, _{NLM}] a worldview is a set of beliefs that are consistent with each other and form a unified point of view . . . The core beliefs of a worldview address concerns central to the meaning of human life . . . The core beliefs . . . have important implications for many other beliefs and practices in daily life . . . A worldview, then, is a set of beliefs and practices that shapes a person’s approach to the most important issues in life. Through our worldview, we determine priorities, explain our relationship to God and fellow human beings, assess the meaning of events, and justify our actions (1998: 23-24).

A Christian worldview, therefore, as I use it throughout this work, refers to the belief system of Christians which is based on biblical revelation and includes the central events of that revelation, that is, creation, incarnation, redemption, and the eschaton. While I am aware that Christians throughout the world have diverse and even changing interpretations of these events, I maintain that few would deny the essential and universal importance of such core beliefs. A

Christian worldview, then, is one that holds true to the central faith tenets of biblical revelation.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, as I will demonstrate in this work, has both negative and positive implications for the Christian worldview. This is so even though postmodernism — as ideologies go — is a relatively late arrival in Western history, its earliest proponent being the historian Arnold Toynbee. In the late 1930s, Toynbee suggested that the modern period had ended in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I and he believed that the world that survived the ruins of that shattering experience should be called “post-modern.” He chose the start of that global conflict as a starting point for postmodernism because he believed that it had “brought to an end liberalism’s promise of inevitable progress and determined optimism” (Mohler in Dockery 1995: 68).

Postmodernity, therefore, is primarily a reaction to modernity’s embrace of the inevitable progress and optimism which have been characteristic of what has been labeled the Enlightenment Project. The Enlightenment Project was itself, in turn, a rejection of the superstition, religion, and mythology of the premodern period of world history. Accordingly, modern humanity was deemed to be enlightened by a worldview of an objective, scientific methodology which was informed by reason not superstition, by empirical observation not religious faith, and by universal standards of truth not by local myths or tribal superstitions.

Moreover, modernity declared that its outlook was additionally enlightened by philosophies such as those of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Among these, perhaps none so influenced the modern mentality as has John Locke (1632-1704). Locke was an empiricist and a positivist before Auguste Comte (1798-1857) made that way of thinking prevalent in the West. Locke “rejected Descartes’s view that the mind (which Descartes has so severely distinguished from the physical world) was endowed by the Creator with ‘innate ideas.’ His view was similar to that of Ockham: the ‘ideas’ of understanding were produced by the compounding of the data of sensible experience” (Thornhill 2000: 21).

Postmodernism's reaction to all this was motivated by a growing conviction that reason could not assess things objectively because it was affected by its own built-in bias. Therefore, observers of nature's apparent order could not be neutral in their observations because they viewed nature from within the shell of their finite human experience which had already been noetically shaped by presuppositional biases. As Alasdair MacIntyre put it, " ' The empiricist concept of experience was a cultural invention of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . . . invented as a panacea for the epistemological crises of the seventeenth century; it was intended as a device to close the gap between *seems* and *is*, between appearance and reality' " (Thornhill 2000: 68).

Postmodern thinking, then, like that of modernity, was shaped by philosophy. But it has flourished more recently because of the influence of literary criticism. Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, and a host of others, began to notice the impreciseness of language, that is, that words were about other words, that texts seemed to be camouflaging the power motives of the writers, that meaning was something that had to be *assigned* to texts rather than something that *flowed from* texts, and that all texts were based on a multitude of other texts (unknown to the reader), the resulting intertextuality of which had the outcome of corrupting an author's authority. Thus, the effect of all this on the Christian worldview, how it has been affected (both positively and negatively) by postmodernism, and how it might be reestablished, is what this work proposes for consideration. To accomplish this, I intend in Part One to begin with an account of a series of changes that has had the net effect of producing the disestablishment of the Christian worldview. Chapter 1, therefore, treats the change in the authority of the Christian metanarrative which is the direct result of the dominance of postmodern thinking. This means, of course, that I accept the notion of postmodern literary theory that Christianity is a logocentric metanarrative. As such, it is founded on biblical revelation and focused on the pivotal New Testament doctrine of the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Chapter 1 continues with a discourse on the key elements of postmodern literary theory.

Major change in worldview authority inevitably produces paradigm shifts in belief systems. Chapter 2 is concerned with those changes. Since universal truth is a hallmark of modernity, it follows that its rejection by postmodernism will produce ideological relativism. The result is a blurring of the distinction between truth and error in epistemology and the notion of right and wrong in ethics. (It also has an effect on aesthetics, especially as it touches the world of the arts and architecture, but I give little space to that dimension of the problem in this work.) In a relativistic world of postmodernism, all opinions, tastes, and choices tend to be equally valid or invalid, desirable or undesirable. But the response of many postmoderns to this situation often is a shrug of the shoulders accentuated by a resigned muttering of the incoherent word: “whatever.” Also, the blurring of distinctives brought about by postmodernism extends as well to the credibility, or lack thereof, of speeches and texts and to whether “reality” is objectively present or simply “a social construct.”

In chapter 3, I give considerable attention to the effects of postmodern thinking in Western society’s principal institutions of higher education, Christianity, and culture. By now, almost everyone is familiar with the term: “political correctness.” PC, as it is called, is actually the result of a change in vision by university leaders. Before and during the modern period their vision had been to lead students in a search for and discovery of truth in order to use that discovery to improve the lot of humanity. But, with the loss of objective truth as a casualty of postmodern thinking, that option is no longer viable for in a postmodern age one does not *discover* truth, one *creates* it. Thus, universities have become reconstructors of society rather mere instructors of it. It can be argued, of course, that universities are still attempting to improve society though by a different route.

But Christianity is in a different position. From premodernity on through the era of modernity, Christianity had seen its primary role in society as one of giving spiritual instruction and moral guidance. An important part of that instruction and guidance was the proclamation of

Christian doctrine. With the coming of postmodernity and its multiple truth claims, however, Christianity became just another interpretative community with no more prominence than any other community possessed. In fact, it may be argued that in many quarters Christianity has had much less prominence. With this change, the strategy of Christian leaders began to evolve into one of making the gospel “relevant” to the concerns of the culture. This has taken many forms, among them a de-emphasis on doctrine, followed by an emphasis on therapeutic ministries which produced, in turn, an accent on psychology in counseling, teaching, and preaching; all of which, as methodologies, tend to make Christianity more appealing to market-niched consumer interests and less appealing as a grand narrative.

After all, in the very same way, postmodernism is a movement that puts much emphasis on “what works,” for certain individuals and communities. “It works for me or it works for us” is therefore a frequently heard refrain in a postmodern environment. Accordingly, chapter 3 takes a look at the change in how ethics is now viewed in Western culture. Ethical “oughtness,” the idea that some actions are inherently right or wrong, a legacy that predates but includes the Judeo-Christian ethic, has given way to cultural ethical relativism. The former ethical approach was based on a model of universal truth, of moral imperatives that were delivered through divine revelation or placed by God in the consciences of all human beings. The current model is based on human preference. Determination of what is right and wrong in the culture is now a *social construct*, not the result of divine moral commandments or human categorical imperatives. Because this is so, there are no longer moral *standards* that inform an individual’s or group’s moral decisions; there are moral *choices* and these choices are subject to change depending upon what an individual or community deems convenient or desirable.

Part Two of this work concerns the conditions and strategies by which Christianity might be reestablished as a credible worldview in a postmodern age. It takes into account the notion that postmodernism actually has a beneficial effect on that effort because it has provided definite

advantages for Christianity, among them the ideological overthrow of the ethos of modernity by postmodernism as well as the creative ideas that followed from that, especially certain innovations of literary theory.

Chapter 4, therefore, focuses on the harvest of new ideas and methodologies which has come out of the advent of postmodernism, among them the collapse of modernity as a ruling cultural paradigm as well as new paradigms in science and critical study along with the creation of new literary critical tools for the exegesis and study of the Bible. That chapter closes with a look at how a return to cultural pluralism creates a situation for Christianity not unlike that of the first century when the Christian faith enjoyed its greatest spread across the world. This kind of cultural pluralism (and some of the ideas that emanate from ideological pluralism) can be a stimulus for the renewal of Christianity.

In chapter 5, I briefly review some Christian responses to the challenge of postmodernism beginning with negative responses because, at least at this time, those are the more prominent, especially among evangelicals. I have chosen, therefore, to take a look at the works of David Wells and Thomas Oden because they represent different negative responses with Wells excoriating postmodernism while Oden, in the main, uses its rejection of the prerogatives of modernity as a means of turning the attention of Christians toward what he considers to be the more substantive and rewarding benefits of classical Christianity.

But there are some Christians, especially evangelicals, who find elements in postmodernism worth celebrating and even emulating. Among them are Stanley Grenz and the authorial team of Middleton and Walsh. Grenz believes that the postmodern emphasis on community interpretative models challenges Christianity to recover such an emphasis for its own model of practicing the faith. Thus, he calls for a revisioning of Christian theology that would move it away from what he considers its too heavy dependence on dogma to the more relational aspect of Christianity as is found in faith building communities. Grenz does not therefore call for the

jettisoning of doctrinal commitment but rather for a shift in emphasis which, in his view, makes the gospel more relevant to postmodern thinkers.

Middleton and Walsh, on the other hand, believe that postmodernism has challenged Christians to take an entirely new look at their own metanarrative. They are convinced that when they do so they will discover certain similarities between Christianity and postmodernism as well as places where they can disagree and yet remain open to further ideological engagement. One of those points of disagreement is the postmodern idea that a metanarrative must inevitably be rooted in a totalizing ideology. To the contrary, the authors insist that the biblical documents which support the Christian metanarrative are not totalizing at all. Instead, like postmodernism, the Bible is also an advocate of the disenfranchised, the poor, and the oppressed. Moreover, the authors find that some aspects of the postmodern emphasis on the hermeneutic of suspicion may actually enhance Christianity because it challenges Christians to consider whether their motive for using the Bible sometimes may be nothing more than the means of simply exercising power over others. Instead, they call for humility and a complete dependence upon the power of God on the part of Christians. After all, the Bible does have a metanarrative for the use of power but it is God's prerogative as to how it is used not theirs (Zechariah 4:6).

In chapter 6, I suggest some of the factors which are necessary for the reestablishment of the Christian worldview in a postmodern age. Among them are what I have chosen to call *Responsible Reading*. I have chosen this term as a deliberate play-off of the postmodern hermeneutical methodology of Reader Response while, at the same time, expressing a genuine appreciation for some of the ideas of postmodern literary theory, including certain facets of the New Hermeneutic, the Hermeneutical Circle with its Two Horizons, and the dynamic of Language Event. However, unlike those who promote post-structuralism, I reject the "hermeneutic of suspicion" as a general principle, opting instead for a "hermeneutic of trust" modeled after Augustinian Hermeneutics. Moreover, while Gadamer's "circle" has much to

commend it, I consider Osborne's "spiral" preferable for responsible reading because it is predicated on the assumption that there is actual meaning in biblical texts (and for that matter, all texts) rather than an endless deferral of meaning. But responsible reading is not complete for Christians without the role of the Holy Spirit, a factor that is missing, as one might expect, from postmodern Reader Response hermeneutics.

The reestablishment of a Christian worldview also requires a reintroduction of the idea of ethical oughtness to civil affairs. There are already signs that the culture is becoming more responsive to this concept. A recent example is the return of "character training" in some of America's primary and secondary schools. Finally, the sixth chapter closes with suggestions for recovering the grand narrative of Christianity.

In the end I have chosen in this work to take an intermediate position between what I consider the extremes of those who completely reject the premisses of postmodernism and those who are all too willing to revision Christian theology because of postmodernism's influence on Western thinking. Of course, Christians can and should learn from postmodernity just as it has learned from modernity (as, say, from the work of Copernicus); therefore, it need not totally reject either. On the other hand, neither should Christians be intellectually intimidated or feel forced into an ideological shell by what they consider to be alien and bold new ideologies such as postmodernism. Rather, Christians have a rich and varied spiritual and intellectual heritage of their own which more than justifies any attempt they care to make in seeking to reestablish a Christian worldview in a postmodern age.

PART ONE

THE DISESTABLISHMENT

OF THE

CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

A Change in Authority: From Logocentrism to Deconstructionism

1.1. The Christian Worldview: A Logocentric Metanarrative

The Christian worldview is best understood, in the context of postmodernism, under the rubric of metanarrative (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 83). This is not because it is true or false, a matter of small consequence to postmoderns, or because it is meaningful to faith communities, which it clearly is, but because it is the grandest of all narratives, the story of God's self-revelation to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. As such, metanarrative serves as a descriptive term for the Christian worldview in that it is elastic enough to cover the broad ideological and theological diversity of Christian faith communities and yet narrow enough to satisfy its definition as an "interpretative structure which gives meaning to reality and common experience" (Dockery 1995: 235). The interpretative structure which is held in common by Christians everywhere is theistic as over against naturalistic, universal as over against local, and ethical as over against antinomian.

I am aware that there is wide divergence in the views of those who are committed to a representative Christian worldview. Doctrinally, these views are as diverse as those avowed by fundamentalists at one end of the theological spectrum and liberals at the other end; ecclesiastically, they range from Roman Catholic to Protestant and within each of these major divisions there is a still broader range of peculiar, some would even say bizarre, denominations. The expressions of how these various subgroups worship God also varies widely from the silent devotion of the Quakers to the very lively and noisy celebrations of charismatics. Therefore, for purposes of this work, I have deliberately qualified the Christian worldview as one that functions as a metanarrative, a grand story of the central acts of God who is at work in the world as Creator, Redeemer, and Sovereign Lord. "The gospel is a metanarrative: it is 'the greatest story ever told'" (Crouch 2000: 80). Thus, the Christian worldview, as I use that term throughout this

work, is representative of all persons, of whatever denomination, who hold to the age old ethos of classical Christian faith.

The focus of this work, however, will not be on doctrine as such, though that is an essential part of the Christian worldview, but on the basic Christian commitment to logocentrism which characterizes those who are devoted to the truth of the Word of God, a *universal* first principle in contradistinction to the *local* community values of postmodernism. My choice of the word logocentrism as a distinguishing feature of the Christian worldview is deliberate in that I intend to demonstrate that Christianity is rooted in a reliable, stable, communicative word of God, the very thing that is denied by postmodern literary theory. I begin, then, with this literary device because it is required in the establishment of a metanarrative that one use words to define and center it. Moreover, there are two basic assumptions which a logocentric metanarrative provides which are helpful for the Christian worldview: “that there is some guaranteed correspondence between thought and reality, and that words are the *immediate* expression of thoughts. . . . (It) is the belief that the meaning of words and the truth of ideas is guaranteed by an authoritative source or center” (Vanhoozer 1998: 64, 59, italics added). For this reason, Christianity as a logocentric metanarrative fits the Christian worldview well because it is centered on an objective standard of truth, that is, on the truth of biblical revelation.

Christianity, then, is well suited for a logocentric view of the world, a metanarrative that describes the world as it is perceived to be by the people of faith. It is, in German parlance, and in the history of ideas, a *Weltanschauung*. The word *Weltanschauung* was used by Immanuel Kant to denote the ‘idea’ of the world and its moral ethos (Kant 1996: 31-130; see also Orr 1893: 9-10; 415). It was used by Orr to denote “the widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology. To speak, therefore, of a ‘Christian view of the world’ implies that Christianity also has its highest point of view . . . and that this, when developed, constitutes an ordered whole”(1893: 3).

This is not to say that those who hold the Christian worldview are united in that perspective for it is also true that just one Christian view of everything *beyond* certain basic propositions of biblical truth is not possible (Holmes 1985: 16). Likewise, because of the fallen and fallible nature of human beings (even the redeemed), the Christian worldview is not final or pervasive. This is because (1) “Our knowledge is incomplete [while it remains that there are *some* things we *do* know with a sense of certainty. NLM], and (2) Christian theology is not monolithic. It is diverse with many traditions” (Holmes 1985: 15). Nevertheless, *for purposes of distinguishing it from postmodernism*, it is sufficient to declare that the Christian worldview is foundational in character; it is that “which is founded on the basic tenets” of the Word of God (Nash 1992: 26).

Some even go further in their evaluation of the Christian worldview, among them, the Christian apologist, David Noebel. He insists that Christianity has a consistent worldview, perhaps the only consistent worldview. “Christianity . . . is the only worldview that provides a consistent explanation of all the facts of reality with regard to theology, philosophy, ethics, economics, or anything else.” Noebel cites a reference from Mortimer Adler, noted philosopher: “I believe Christianity is the only logical, consistent faith in the world” (1991: 13, 15).

The Christian worldview, therefore, is a perspective that involves all of life, including human relations, and it is the view that dominated the thinking of the West from the time of Christianity’s ascendancy until the Enlightenment. However, it is now disestablished everywhere. Its decline began with the rise of the modern era which was dominated by Enlightenment rationalist thinking and its disestablishment was completed by the end of the twentieth century (Henry 1998: 163).

It is not surprising, then, that rationalism (and later, secularism) would find no place for the Christian worldview for it must be admitted that such a perspective is based on theological assumptions that derive from supernaturalism. It therefore begins and ends with God. Among its basic doctrines are creation, the fall, redemption, missions, and eschatology. Its basis in logocentrism means that it is exclusive in what it claims about God and humans (rather than

inclusive) because it is based on universal principles of objective truth. But such a confident claim is considered unacceptable by many. In the modern period it was considered unacceptable because it did not fit the Enlightenment canons of reason (Krentz 1975: 17). In the postmodern period it stands rejected because it shares the same epistemological platform as modernism, that is, foundationalism, a theory of knowledge that affirms the need for certain foundational principles as the basis of all thought (Geisler 1999: 259).

Christianity and postmodernism are therefore diametrically opposed in perspective. This has caused some Christians to think that postmodernism has created a crisis of belief not only for Christianity itself but for those Western institutions which are now under its influence. They suggest that we dare not ignore this crisis and the postmodern ideology which they perceive as its cause, especially as it is represented by literary theory. Others have given the conflict of worldviews against postmodern ideology an almost apocalyptic significance. “A massive intellectual revolution is taking place,” says Princeton theologian Diogenes Allen, “that is perhaps as great as that which marked off the modern world from the Middle Ages” (1989: 2).

If Allen is right the time has come for serious engagement with the issues raised by postmodernism, particularly those aspects of literary theory that have created such a challenge for Christian thinkers. Major examples of such theory are *reading against the text*, *demystifying the text*, *reader-response*, and *the hermeneutics of suspicion*. These are generally considered alien in ideology to the Christian perspective because they — and other such literary devices — tend to undermine any idea of determinate meaning in *any* text at all, including, of course, biblical ones. We are also reminded that all these inevitably have theological implications. After all, as David Tracy has well demonstrated in his work on theological pluralism and its relationship to theology, “theology is a thoroughly hermeneutical enterprise” (1975: 49, 51).

Therefore, Christians are well advised to seek an adequate understanding of the literary issues of postmodernism. This could be followed by the creative uses of whatever is positive in

literary analysis as a way of advancing the Christian worldview as an alternative viewpoint in a pluralistic age. I submit this as an alternative because it is clear that postmodernism is not going away, at least not in the short term, and therefore the best way to deal with it is through the development of a well thought out revitalized traditional Christian belief system which fully takes into account recent movements in epistemology and hermeneutics.

We begin, then, with the principle that the Christian worldview is a perspective primarily shaped by language, at first spoken by prophets and apostles, and later preserved through texts. It is thus a logocentric faith that begins with divine revelation. But revelation is dependent on communication of some kind (Romans 10: 17). It could be non-verbal in form as in God's powerful parting of the Red Sea so that his people might escape from their enemy, the advancing Egyptians. In most cases, however, revelation is communicated to God's servants through language, spoken and written. After all, God first spoke to prophets and apostles who later wrote much of what He said on papyri thus providing Scripture for posterity.

With the close of such revelation in its fixed form in the written canon, however, Christian faith has become grounded in the viable and valid texts that have been available for the communication of God's purpose for centuries. These texts have provided the means for the private and public reading of the Scriptures and the public proclamation of preaching. Of course, there have been other means of communicating God's revelation as well such as the use of gospel tracts and one-on-one personal evangelism. In any case, in the final analysis, Christian faith is always engendered through God's revelation of himself, sometimes through the non-verbal demonstration of God's mighty acts in nature as in the miracles of the Old and New Testaments, but most often through language (Romans 10: 17). It is here, then, that the tension between Christianity and postmodernism is most conspicuous in today's intellectual climate. The ramifications of postmodern literary theory for Christianity are that it provokes many questions about language and meaning, including the nature of semiotics and semantics, which have tended

to undermine confidence in the use of words (including, of course, the words of Scripture) as a means of communication. However, this does not mean that the Christian worldview cannot actually be enhanced by close readings of recent postmodern literary criticism. For one thing, Derrida's use of the term "logocentrism" (1973: xli, 99) is helpful in distinguishing between the ideologies of the Christian worldview and postmodernism.

Logocentrism, therefore, once established what passed for authority in Western civilization. As such it served as the structural foundation for both theology and philosophy. For philosophy, at least through the time of Descartes, it provided for certainty and stability in language and thus constituted the epistemological basis for all of knowledge. It is this logocentrism that has been the basis of the Christian worldview as well.

(U)niversal logic confirms logocentrism, is produced within it and with its help, exactly like the Hegelian critique to which it will be subjected. I emphasize the complicity of these two contradictory movements. Within a certain historical epoch, there is a profound unity among infinitist theology, logocentrism, and a certain technicism. . . . In an original and non-'relativist' sense, logocentrism is an ethnocentric metaphysics. It is related to the history of the West (Derrida 1974: 78-79).

Vanhoozer responds to Derrida's description of the place that logocentrism has held in the West. "Logocentrism is the belief that there is some stable point *outside* language – reason, revelation, Platonic Ideas – from which one can ensure that one's words, as well as the whole system of distinctions that order our experience, correspond to the world In short, *logocentrism* stands for the fundamental presupposition that it is possible to speak truly: that our talk will be about reality, and not merely talk about talk" (1998: 52-56; 87).

Worldviews, then, are based on assumptions about reality and thus constitute a conceptual framework that is considered authoritative. While problematic for some (Henry 1998: 171), the very word "worldview" suggests authority because a worldview is considered a reliable frame of

reference which functions as a prism through which all reality is viewed by an observer. In a sense, of course, a worldview also has the distinct *disadvantage* that it may cause some of those who hold it to miss some of the things they might otherwise have seen in perspectives other than their own. Postmodernism, on the other hand, dispenses with such concerns in its attempt to get beyond worldviews altogether, to arrive at indeterminacy, instability, and even uncertainty in epistemology.

A Christian worldview, of course, is based on theology. But theology, at least from the perspective of postmodernism, is notoriously unequivocal, restrictive, and some insist, even oppressive. Theology becomes, in such a view, the most authoritative and thus unattractive of all the metanarratives. This is because, due to its metaphysical nature, it has been judged by critics to be without the right to make exclusive truth claims anyway, especially those that impose on human autonomy. Accordingly, it seems otherworldly, unknowable, and even undesirable. Theology thus functions epistemologically as an authority from above, what Nancy Murphy calls an “outside/in” authority, that is, something imposed from outside the human mind (1996: 32-35). The authority of deconstructionism, on the other hand, is more attractive to postmodern people because it functions as an authority from below, in the world of time and place. As such, it functions “inside/out,” that is, it proceeds from the human mind and is expressed outwardly to others (Murphy 1996: 2, 28-32). The one is an authority that affirms the dimensions of infinity (the metaphysical), the other an authority that affirms the limitations of finiteness.

As we have said, the Christian worldview is a product of revelation which came to men and women in biblical times through the mediation of the acts of God, prophetic visions, and ultimately, through language. Language, of course, is not an exclusive property of the Christian worldview. Philosophy, at least up through and including the time of Descartes, also depended on language, especially as it rested on a logocentric foundation. Its principles, like those of theology, were derived from a common understanding of the meaning of words that gave assurance

of a universal epistemological reality. Postmodern literary theory, on the other hand, stresses the opposite condition, that of epistemological uncertainty, of local customs and epistemic concepts that are based on human inventions or constructs of “reality” which are in perpetual flux in time and place.

Nevertheless, philosophy, especially that which preceded Hume, was foundationalist in nature requiring the unity and certainty of established epistemological principles. This is why early and medieval Christianity felt so at home with Plato and Aristotle. Augustine christianized Plato and Aquinas did the same with Aristotle. They did so, however, without giving up the truth claims of the Scriptures being convinced, as they were, that Christianity was founded on the divinely inspired truth of revelation. But all this, the underpinnings of both theology and philosophy, is currently passe in the intellectual centers of the Western world. Such ideas have been replaced by an ideology that despairs of human confidence in the capacity of language as a means of communicating either foundational or objective truth.

In the context of logocentrism, then, worldviews are not given, they are shaped by one’s metanarrative. Moreover, Christianity’s metanarrative is impressive because it is centered on God’s revelation of himself to humanity. Therefore, the central issue from the perspective of Christianity is this: What is the relationship, if any, between God and his creation? Of course, we are now aware that even such terms as “God” and “creation” are replete with linguistic challenge in this postmodern age since they are considered, after all, to be mere constructs or fictions of humanity. For Christians, however, these words, though rejected by postmodernity (and much of modernity for that matter), refer to reality. Reality, for Christians, as we have said, is defined by their metanarrative, an interpretative account that determines “things as they really are.” Metanarratives, therefore, are considered objectively true, transcending time and circumstance (Carson 1996: 63). While postmodernism eschews metanarratives it does not escape them altogether since its rejection of modernity is an attempt, however exorbitant, to describe the way

things really are.

Worldviews can also be so comprehensive that persons who hold them, either because they were so inclined from youth, or because they arrive at a worldview as a result of intellectual analysis, often do so without regard to their origin. Moreover, worldviews are not permanent in any sense. They can be changed and conversion from one worldview to another is a prevalent condition, especially in a pluralistic environment. Nash, a Christian philosopher, adds another dimension. He writes: "Of course, we must also recognize that many changes regarding worldviews have little or nothing to do with Christian conversion. Even the noted Christian writer, C. S. Lewis, admits that he abandoned a naturalistic worldview months before his actual conversion" (Nash 1992: 25). Like Lewis there have been many in Western culture that have accepted the biblical worldview as one that corresponds to reality, as they understand it, even though they do not necessarily embrace the specific biblical content that informs that worldview. For instance, polls taken by Barna and others in America reveal that large numbers of people continue to believe in God, heaven, miracles, and other teachings of the Bible though they have little or no contact with organized Christianity or regard for its message.

Worldviews can also provoke passion and militancy in certain individuals within all advocacy groups. For example, conservative Christians have responded to the growing strength of postmodernism with a number of books and articles in periodicals that warn of its threat to the truth claims of Christian faith. On the other hand, the militancy expressed by some postmoderns in promoting their ideology can be seen in the aggressive stance they take against what they call the "totalizing" oppression of Christian dogma. Christians of the more liberal persuasion, however, have taken a different approach by accommodating themselves to many of the tenets of postmodernism. Among these are the more extreme exponents of the liberal view such as feminists and liberationists (Bednarowski 1994: 6). They attack the established Christian worldview by arguing that its source is not the revelation of God but the interests of dominant

male social groups. Among these is Adrianna Adam, a professor at Duke Divinity School. She argues that Biblical writers did not so much represent the God of whom they wrote as the class interests which they served. Showing evidence of the sociological perspective of Marxism clearly at work in her, Adam then asserts that “dominant social groups, which produced and saved biblical texts, shaped these texts to correspond to the dominant group’s class interests” (1995: 48-49).

With the rejection of logocentrism by postmodernism has come the demise of modern philosophy as well. Logocentrism is as essential to philosophy as it is to the Christian worldview. But the disdain which postmodern scholarship has for logocentrism has especially dire consequences for theology because, for Christians, “the most important element of any worldview is what it says or does not say about God” (Nash 1992: 26). This means that theology has even more of a stake in logocentrism than philosophy because a stable and determinate word from God is its very life. It is important to understand, however, that Christian logocentrism, though it has the authority of divine revelation, does not translate into infallibility of interpretation. This is because Christians are taught by Scripture that “all our knowledge is incomplete” (Holmes 1985: 15).

Postmodernism, then, (also known in literary theory as poststructuralism) has given up on the efficacy of language to communicate *any* determination of reality. The effects of this despair of the requirement for clear communication through language will be considered in chapter 2. Here we simply maintain that the integrity of language is essential because the Christian worldview is logocentric at its core, that is, it is centered in the word of God as spoken through the prophets and apostles in original revelation and later written in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

1.1.1. Founded on Revelation

As I have indicated, Christianity is not only logocentric in character but it also has affinities with foundationalism. This is important for at least two reasons: First, Christianity has a long

history. It is therefore not ephemeral; it is here to stay. Indeed, this is what one would expect of a movement that has foundations. Thus, it is unlikely that postmodernism or any other intellectual movement will dislodge it. Second, the Christian worldview is, as the postmodernists often affirm, possessed of the notion of a “philosophical and theological conviction that there are beliefs or experiences that are in themselves beyond doubt, and upon which systems of belief and understanding can therefore be constructed with certainty” (Lakeland 1997: 125). It must be noted, however, that foundationalism is not of Christian origin. It is based on a Cartesian model which means that it is rooted in the legacy of the Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationalism. Nevertheless, a system of thought such as the Christian worldview has been around much longer than the work of Descartes and has from the beginning rested on the foundation of an epistemology that is rooted in the Scriptures.

The charge by postmodernists that Christianity is foundational is meant both as a critique and an affirmation of the institutional irrelevancy of Christianity due to its ties with a discredited modernity. Yet, both Protestants and Catholics seem to understand that the foundational nature of the Scriptures must not be denied even in this postmodern era. A recent conference on “Bible and Church” featured the Catholic second only in authority to the Pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. The participants were led by postmodern Protestant theologian, George Lindbeck, to embrace a “community-building hermeneutic”(Neuhaus 1989: x). This idea was met with favor by most participants but, whatever their conclusions in regard to the attractiveness of that idea, Ratzinger reminded the assembled ecumenical group that “the last word belongs to the Church, but the Church must give *the last word to the Bible*” (Neuhaus 1989: 118, italics added). Obviously, for the participants (and Christians everywhere), the Bible has served as a foundation for the theological conviction that “there are beliefs . . . that are in themselves beyond doubt,” (Lakeland 1997: 125) among them the conviction of the existence of God, of humanity’s sinful condition, of the redemptive mercy of Christ, and of the eschaton.

In affirming that the Christian worldview is founded on revelation, I therefore want to reiterate its logocentric basis, that is, its employment of language as a primary means of communicating God's revelation to the world. In the postmodern literary theory of Reader-Response, one is free to accept or reject whatever parts of revelation suit the temperament or bias of the reader. In the Christian worldview, however, there is no such liberty. Rather, one accepts *the full scope of revelation* because it is understood that all revelation is centered in the Word of God.

Therefore, because of the logocentric character of divine revelation, its acceptance in its entirety enables Christians to build an adequate perspective on the world that God has created. Only in this way can the Word of God function as the foundation of a worldview that can be called Christian. This kind of thinking is evident in the work of a late nineteenth century theologian, James Orr, one to whose work I have already referred. Orr was the editor of the highly acclaimed *International Bible Encyclopedia*. His book, *The Christian View of God and the World*, is considered by many to be a classic on the Christian worldview. In it (1983: 37-39) he gives a list of 10 characteristics of the Christian worldview as based on the revelation of God. I submit five of these as sufficient to demonstrate the foundationalist basis of the Christian worldview as seen through the eyes of a leading Christian scholar of the nineteenth century.

- I. First, then, the Christian view affirms the existence of a Personal, Ethical, Self-Revealing God. It is thus at the outset a system of Theism, and as such is opposed to all systems of Atheism, Agnosticism, Pantheism, or mere Deism.
- II. The Christian view affirms the creation of the world by God, His immanent presence in it, His transcendence over it, and His holy and wise government of it for moral ends.
- III. The Christian view affirms the spiritual nature and dignity of man – his creation in the Divine image, and destination to bear the likeness of God in a perfected relation of sonship.

IV. The Christian view affirms the fact of the sin and disorder of the world, not as something belonging to the Divine idea of it, and inhering in it by necessity, but as something which has entered it by the voluntary turning aside of man from his allegiance to his Creator, and from the path of normal development. The Christian view of the world, in other words, involves a Fall as the presupposition of its doctrine of Redemption; whereas the 'modern' view of the world affirms that the so-called Fall was in reality a rise, and denies by consequence the need of redemption in the scriptural sense.

V. The Christian view affirms the historical Self-Revelation of God to the patriarchs and in the line of Israel, and, as brought to light by this, a gracious purpose of God for the salvation of the world...

Since the time of Orr there have been both a reaffirmation of the principles he enunciates and a revision. The reaffirmation comes from the published works of those who are considered conservative in theology, writers like Nash, Carson, Schaeffer, Wells, et al. The revision, on the other hand, comes from the more liberal spectrum of Christianity in writers like Adrianna Adam, Stanley Fish, et al. Mediating positions are taken by writers such as Nancy Murphy, Stanley Grenz and Thomas Oden. In other words, the Christian worldview is no longer monolithic as it once was in the days of Orr though it is still a vital and necessary component of contemporary Christianity. The revision of the Christian worldview, therefore, is not so much of doctrinal change but of philosophical perspective. The revisors (the liberals) still hold to some of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith but they reject its foundationalist and logocentric support system. Mediating scholars are evangelicals who are searching for innovative ways to communicate the gospel in a postmodern age and thus are adopting postmodern categories such as "revisioning" (Grenz 1993) and "holistic theology" (Murphy 1996).

Another response to the issues raised by Orr is the work of Arthur F. Holmes, a leader in the Institute for Advanced Christian Studies founded by Carl F. H. Henry. Holmes contends that

Christians have no alternative but to admit that both objectivity and subjectivity are valid ways of looking at reality. However, the Christian vision of a unified worldview requires that we “identify the objective and universal (as Husserl did in his work on phenomenology) and detach it from the purely relative” (Holmes 1983: 47).

It is clear, moreover, that faith is the only adequate response to divine revelation. While this is both fundamental and foundational to the Christian worldview, John Forrester maintains that this is too simple on the surface for most people and senses that some might call it ‘bootstrap’ thinking. He writes:

You set yourself to believe something, then make that belief the foundation of thought. Belief cannot be dismissed that easily, however. Belief is integral to *all* human thought. Non-Christians also have to defend their presuppositions. Assessing what we believe is a complex matter, but one approach is to look at how satisfying the belief system is. Christians argue that the worldview built on Christian presuppositions best explains the facts of life (Forrester 1994: 20, italics added).

Therefore, it remains for most adherents of the Christian worldview that some kind of foundationalist perspective — if not the classical foundationalism which Plantinga rejects, at least some form of foundationalism — is required by Christianity. Though such foundationalism is rejected by postmodernism, there is simply no way around it for Christians. Moreover, the scope and depth of that foundationalism is all encompassing. For instance, Carl F. H. Henry calls attention to the universal scope of the Christian faith which Scripture commands: “The Christian world-life view embraced heaven and earth from creation to end time and enlisted a fellowship of redeemed and regenerate humans on a salvific mission of interpersonal and public duty and functioning as a channel of God’s love and of social justice” (1998: 164). Forrester agrees and concludes that the Christian worldview is “(f)ar from being restrictive and provincial, [rather, NLM] the Christian perspective surveys a large horizon” (1994: 24).

The foundation which undergirds the Christian worldview, therefore, is divine revelation, especially the Word of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Nash believes that one best understands the connection which Christianity has with foundationalism by considering the place that the Bible holds in the Christian's view of the world (1994: 15-16). The text of the Bible informs both Christians and Jews that nothing is more foundational to faith than the Word of God.

Of course, this does not mean that revelation comes only in *written form*. Christians believe that the ultimate revelation of God is found in the *person* of Jesus Christ who is also the living Word of God. Moreover, revelation was first spoken to the prophets and apostles *before* it was written. It is therefore an axiom of systematic theology that revelation is centered in the word (in language), both spoken and written.

The Christian worldview, then, is in every sense *logocentric*. For example, we see this centering of the word in the opening statements of Genesis concerning the creation of heaven and earth: "And God *said* . . ." (Genesis 1: 3), and this primacy of the word is also confirmed in the New Testament, ". . . the worlds were framed by the *Word* of God" (Hebrews 11: 3). The Gospels also begin with an emphasis on communication, "The beginning of the good *message* (*euaggelion*) of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1: 1). Getting it right, moreover, that is, accurately reporting the truth of God's communicative acts, was so important that the evangelist Luke assured all that he had carefully checked everything out before commencing to write his Gospel account. He wrote: "Even as they [those who declared the Gospel NLM] delivered them unto us, who were from the beginning eyewitnesses, and ministers of the *Word*" (Luke 1: 2). Each of these examples show the central or foundational place that the Word of God has in the shaping of the Christian worldview.

Accordingly, we conclude that revelation is not only logocentric but that it is mediated, especially with the closing of the canon, through the structure of an unalterable text. And because

revelation is logocentric it is, as we have insisted, also foundational. Its foundationalism is rooted in the communicative force of *propositional* statements because the first thing established for readers is the literal sense which is “the oldest, historical, original idea of the text.” (Neuhaus 1989: 154). But this does not mean that the other forms of revelation such as metaphor, story, hyperbole, drama, and poetry are ruled out. Neither does propositionalism displace or preempt narrative as we shall see in chapter 4. On the other hand, nothing is quite so important for the Christian worldview as the truthfulness of propositional statements. Therefore, this requires that we take a closer look at their significance.

Propositions as a means of communicating revelation have fallen on hard times in this postmodern age. Yet they have always been a vital part of communicating the Christian worldview. Propositions are thus critical to and therefore non-negotiable elements of the Christian worldview. This is problematic for some because their view of truth, shaped by Kantian presuppositions, requires them to posit non-propositional ways of describing the revelation of God. Therefore, some “people cannot understand why the Bible [and its propositions of truth_{NLM}] plays such a normative role in Christian thinking. [But_{NLM}] such people need to recognize that while humans are free to reject the authority of Scripture, they will only substitute some other authority in its place . . . their own opinions or those of other people” (Nash 1994: 12).

It is because of such disdain for the perspective of even the possibility of an authentic word from the God of heaven that the Christian worldview with its representative authority, the holy Scriptures, has long been in disfavor in the West. This disestablishment occurred even before the advent of postmodernism though with it has come also an acceleration of the process. To enable us to see what has been lost in this disestablishment we turn now to a discussion of what makes up the essential *content* of the Christian worldview. It is the logos incarnate, Christ.

1.1.2. Focused on Incarnation

For literary theorists like Austin and post-Bultmannian theologians like Fuchs and Eberling,

language is a creative and dynamic event, a “speech act” (Fuchs in Bratten and Jensen 1995: 144). It is through such speech acts that we create, or have created for us, much of our personal and social environment (even though performance is but one aspect of our use of language, its perlocutionary use). Likewise, in divine revelation there is a juxtaposition of speech and encounter. By this I mean that, in the Christian worldview, God’s use of language is more than a means of communication; it is also a creative encounter. Perhaps, this is best seen in the Johannine Prologue as the evangelist reaches back into the beginning of time and associates the significance of Jesus Christ with God’s spoken word in creation (Genesis 1: 3). Into that context John pours his uniquely conceived perception of the Logos (John 1: 1). English versions of that passage translate the Greek term, *Logos*, as “Word” which is adequate but its broader and more comprehensive meaning is more than can be suggested by that term alone. The Logos idea, while it has affinities with certain elements of Hellenistic philosophy, is also thoroughly biblical in character. John writes that the Logos was present at creation. Moreover, he tells us that Christ, who is the *Logos of Life* (1 John 1:3), was actively involved in the creation of the universe. By connecting the Logos to the act of creation, John thus links his Gospel with the Hebraic understanding of language as a dynamic and active medium of God. Accordingly, the concept of the Logos is associated with the creative dimension of God’s word, both spoken and written. Therefore, the Logos underscores the biblical view that God’s use of language is more than a means of communication. Henry renders a definitive statement that encompasses both the communicative and creative function of the Logos: “For Christianity the Logos of God is the ultimate source of all thought and life. Evangelical Christians are not surprised to hear that human reason is not the origin or fountainhead of truth. The mediating divine Logos undergirds all life and thought” (1998: 175).

J. L. Austin adds an interesting dimension to the idea of speaking as a creative act. He has argued that there are some utterances that have a particular ability to bring about an action rather

than merely describe it. He calls these “performatives.” An example would be a wedding. When the groom and bride are asked to respond to the questions placed by a minister or judge they each respond by saying: “I do.” Thus, each is not simply describing reality but *engaging* in it (Austin 1962: 4-11). This is the sense in which John is using the concept of Logos. Jesus is not just communicating with words. Of course, he is doing that but he is also giving those words perlocutionary effect. His words are therefore performatives; they *make* things happen, not just announce or describe them, and they leave traces of their effect behind.

Accordingly, it is in John’s employment of the Logos as descriptive of the Christ that we come to a clearer understanding of the significance of the value of language for the contrasting worldviews of Christianity and postmodernism. For Christianity, the spoken and written word is dynamic, forceful, and creative in character as well as communicative. Therefore, in connecting the *Logos* with the Hebrew word *amar* (“And God said, Let there be light,” Genesis 1:3) and its cognates, John demonstrates that the Logos is *more* than mere word or reason, it is also a powerful agent of change. This is in contrast to the more radical forms of literary postmodernism which, as we shall see, considers language to be indeterminate, indefinite, and unstable.

In the Christian worldview, therefore, language means more than communication; it also denotes creative power. Through it God “speaks worlds into being” (Hebrews 11: 1). In the Incarnate Logos/Word, God introduces a *performative*, in the person of his Son, Jesus, to the world (John 1: 14). In turn, through the historical event of the Incarnation, God communicates with humanity declaring who he is and what he is about. He is declared, that is, he is *exegeted* by the Logos (John 1: 18). Thus, in the New Testament, the ultimate communication between God and humanity is nonverbal as well as verbal; it is God communicating to humanity *in* his Son as well as *through* language. Postmodernism, however, goes in a different direction. For postmoderns, words, whether spoken or written, while they may have creative dimensions, are also concealed instruments of oppression, the tools of personal and corporate power until

deconstructed. As such, they function as sources of the language games (Wittgenstein 1953: 109-116) that people play and replay until they are rendered incapable of finding *any* ultimate meaning for life. On the other hand, John shows through his use of the term Logos that God is capable of a *meaningful communication* to humanity *that is not limited* by human language.

In John's Gospel, therefore, the Logos as the Word becomes not just a grammatical expression of communication but a human entity, the God-man, Jesus Christ. Thus, the view that the Christian perspective is logocentric in essence is given yet another dimension, the personal, that is, the nonverbal communication of the Incarnation. "No one will dispute that, if Jesus Christ is what the creeds declare Him to be – an Incarnation of the Divine – his Person is necessarily central to His own religion [Judaism_{NLM}], nay, in the universe. . . ." (Orr 1893: 51). It is the Incarnation, then, that causes Orr, Holmes, Henry, and others to insist that God's entrance into the world through his Son not only has universal implications for the earth but for the entire cosmos itself. Incarnation, then, establishes the Gospel's significance for the whole world and rejects the idea that the truth delivered to Christianity is to be relegated to scattered local communities of believers only. Rather, it is a multicultural movement in the best sense of the term, a force to be reckoned with by all, a comprehensive faith that makes sense of the cosmos itself, a worldview with truly universal implications. This is because the Creator has made his presence known in the world which he has created. He has not shunned it. Forrester explains:

The fact that we are made in the image of God means that to some extent we will mirror his ability to know and His way of knowing. . . all 'forms' and 'ideas' find their origin in God. However, Plato's discounting of the physical world is not congruent with Christian teaching. Here Aristotle's appreciation for the input of the five senses [his empiricism_{NLM}] sits more comfortably with the Bible's view of a creation God declared as good. Not only did He declare it good, but He also approved it by the incarnation; He 'moved into the neighborhood' (John 1: 14, *The Message*), thus stamping creation with

the seal of His physical presence (1994: 22).

So while it is revelation that informs the Christian worldview as to content, it is the Incarnation that gives it its unique character. However, while uniqueness itself is not a problem to postmoderns, exclusivity is. Thus, the Incarnation has the effect of making the Christian worldview odious to postmoderns because it gives credence to the idea that Christ is unique, that is, he is the *one way* to God (John 14:6). And as though that were not enough, the Scriptures also make it clear that Christianity, in Christ, is far from being confined to local interpretative communities, rather, it is a faith that has cosmic dimensions (Colossians 1:16-17). Postmodernists, however, reject the Platonic idea that universals describe reality. Those Platonic ideas have characterized much of the modern period but they have been dismissed by postmodernism and along with it any idea of a cosmic dimension such as that which is represented by the scriptural characterization of Christ's authority over the universe. Therefore, Christianity, in the eyes of many postmoderns, is part of that modernistic legacy of universal belief systems that now belongs to the past. Postmoderns believe that there are no absolutes, that all claims to truth are equally valid or invalid depending on the community perspective of which one is a part. Exclusivity, then, is considered by postmodernists to be one of the great evils of foundationalist and logocentric thought (Nash 1994: 1-19). As we shall see in chapter 3, exclusivity is also rejected by theological liberals and their aversion to it is one of the effects of the influence of postmodernism on Christianity.

Any claim to exclusivism, which the Christian doctrine of Incarnation seems to require – for example, that God has only *one* Son who is his “express image” (Hebrews 1: 3) – is met with rejection by postmoderns because it fails, among other things, to take into account that such a claim can only be treated as an interpretation of a first or second century faith community. Therefore, according to postmoderns, it had authority only for those first century persons and for those who would subsequently come to identify with it. This is because, as postmodernists see it,

texts, such as those left behind by first century Christians, lack originality; instead they express ideas that are intertwined with those of countless others, from whom the writers have borrowed, thus leaving behind only a blend of ideas which the reader is required to deconstruct in order to expose the hidden meaning of the text. It is therefore a matter of interpretation that some people including, as postmoderns see it, the interpretative community that produced the Scriptures, think that Christ is God's unique Son. Thus, the worldview of Christianity or any other worldview, for that matter, is rejected by postmodernism. Therefore, no text, including that of the Bible, has meaning in itself; it "means" ultimately only what the reader determines that it does. He is as free to *construct* meaning for it as the writer of the text was to construct it in the first place. In this light, our earlier reference to Orr's work in which he extolled the work of God in Christ appears to be very dated and even incomprehensible to the postmodern mind. Orr seemed to have understood that possibility:

Everything here, of course, depends on the view we take of Christianity itself. The view . . . is that which has its center in the Divine and human Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It implies the true Divinity as well as the true humanity of the Christian Redeemer. . . He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides. He is committed to a view of God, to a view of man, to a view of sin, to a view of Redemption, to a view of human destiny, found *only* in Christianity. This forms [a view NLM] . . . which stands in marked contrast with theories wrought out from a purely philosophical or scientific standpoint (Orr 1893: 4, italics added).

The worldview espoused by Orr, which was logocentric to the core, therefore, is no longer acceptable to this postmodern era (Henry 1998: 163) for postmodernists have a disdain for anything logocentric. They view logocentrism as a form of tyranny (Derrida 1974: 51). Thus they commit themselves to deconstructionism as a means of freeing themselves from the oppression of such tyranny. Derrida describes the work of postmodern literary critics as that of engaging the text, a skill, following Saussure, he denotes as "grammatology." Derrida and others hold that the

text is incomplete in and of itself. Therefore they would substitute what he calls semiology with grammatology. Derrida claims that the latter enables critics to avoid the snare laid out by those who believe that a text has coherence while the former, that is semiology, retains its linguistic (and thus logocentric) center. He writes:

The advantage of this substitution will not only be to give to the theory of writing the scope needed to counter logocentric repression and the subordination to linguistics. It will liberate the semiological project itself from what, in spite of its greater theoretical extension, remained *governed* by linguistics, organized as if linguistics were at once its center and its telos (1974: 51).

Grammatology is therefore the rejection of any interpretation that treats the text as a seamless garment. It is this work of engaging the text that brings us to a consideration of postmodernism's rejection of worldviews. We come, then, to the work of the deconstructionist.

1.2. The Postmodern Rejection of Worldviews: Deconstructionism

A number of factors were involved in the disestablishment of Christianity as the dominant worldview in the West. Among these were the rise of rationalism which culminated in the "pure reason" of Kant, the Darwinian evolutionary hypothesis in science, the materialistic philosophy of the intelligentsia, and a growing emphasis on secularism. But another factor, often overlooked, that has more recently contributed to the disestablishment of the Christian worldview is that of literary criticism. This is because the Christian worldview, since the close of the New Testament canon, has been based on texts, that is, it is a view that is framed by the interpretations which Christians have of biblical texts. It is certainly not monolithic in all its nuances but, in general terms, it is a view shaped by the witness which Scripture gives to the nature of God and humanity, the order of creation, the plan of redemption and the ultimate plan which God has for the cosmos which will be fulfilled in the eschaton. It has also been a very persuasive worldview, especially in Western civilization. Therefore, when the text of Scripture

was honored in the West, some would even say, revered, the Christian worldview dominated in every intellectual field, including education, science, law, and the humanities. However, literary criticism, especially in its postmodern expression of deconstructionism, has produced the death of the author and the loss of the original meaning of the text. The result has been a concomitant loss of authority for all texts including, of course, the authority of the biblical text. Thus, the Christian worldview, while once dominant in the institutional centers of the West, has been replaced by multiple and changing perspectives which reflect a loss of confidence in textual authority. The result of this change is that no particular worldview now dominates in Western culture. Instead, with the spread of the rejection of all worldviews by postmodernism the reigning mentality of the culture has become that of pluralism.

Pluralism is therefore one of the principal effects of postmodernism. It “affirms that reality is found in many as opposed to one. . . . It stands in contrast to monism, which claims that reality is one” (Geisler 1999: 597-598). Pluralism, as an ideological perspective, adopts the attitude that since there are many cultures, races, and religions, none can lay claim to having apprehended objective truth. All viewpoints are therefore equally valid, or as the case may be, invalid. Thus, “when people adopt pluralism, they must abandon every core doctrine of the Christian faith, including the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Incarnation, and the Atonement. Inclusivism [which is a logical result of pluralism_{NLM}] has a significant deleterious affect on the nature and importance of such Christian activities as evangelism and missions” (Nash 1994: 10). It follows, then, that pluralism has no place for biblical authority or *any other kind* of universal authority. Thus, there is no place for the exclusive truth claims of the Christian worldview in a postmodern age.

Therefore, rejection of the authority of *any* claim to universal truth or reality is what rests as the foundation of postmodern deconstructionism. Although it is alleged that Derrida, the father of postmodernism, did not particularly like the term deconstructionism, it has come to serve as a virtual synonym for postmodernism. For Derrida, therefore, deconstructionism is a very

positive thing, it is good news in his perspective because it rescues texts from their tangled contradictions and affirms them in positive ways. He explains:

What is called 'deconstruction' — and I will be very sketchy here, because time does not permit detailed analyses — has never, never opposed institutions as such, philosophy as such, discipline as such. Nevertheless, . . . it is another thing for me to be doing what I am doing here [that is, defining deconstructionism_{NLM}] Because, however affirmative deconstruction is, it is affirmative in a way that is not simply positive, not simply conservative, not simply a way of repeating [affirming_{NLM}] the given institution. I think that the life of an institution implies that we are able to criticize, to transform, to open the institution to its own future. [With deconstruction one is_{NLM}] trying to open something new and something original, something that hasn't been done in that way in other similar universities or programs (1997: 5-6).

But this is not the way that others see it. For them, Derrida's work, his protestations notwithstanding, has resulted in the collapse of the authority of Western institutions or, at least, the reshaping of them in ways that have little affinity with their past. For these critics, though they concede that while Derrida may have good motives for the use of his linguistic tool, deconstructionism, nevertheless find the results of its use less than salutary. For them deconstructionism

is an intense analytical method [of postmodern linguistic theory_{NLM}], occasionally perversely so, that results in the collapse from within of all that it touches. It is an 'analysis' in the etymological sense of the term (Greek: analysis): an 'un-loosing' or 'un-tying.' Deconstruction is thus best understood as a kind of *undoing*, with all the attendant connotations that the term implies: untying, undermining, and ruining. . . . [this is because_{NLM}] Derrida wants deconstruction to function as a kind of intellectual therapy that helps philosophers, theologians, and literary critics confront their deep-seated fear of the messiness of language (Vanhoozer 1998: 52).

Derrida believes that deconstructionism is a serious effort not to destroy Western philosophical thinking but to reform it, though some are convinced that his work has already had the effect of bringing modern philosophy to its end. It is a radical approach to the way in which language is used and its acceptance by increasing numbers in the culture changes the way that theology also is to be understood and communicated. Therefore, it is worth while for Christians to attempt to understand deconstructionism and find ways to respond to the new method particularly as it affects the philosophy of language. A case in point is how deconstructionism affects interpretation including, at least incipiently, biblical texts.

Deconstructive interpretation for the most part consists of very close readings of specific texts (but only rarely, so far, of biblical texts). These readings have been highly unorthodox as they have rejected certain well established and central values: the univocity of meaning, the privileging of the author's intention (or any other point of origin), the location of meaning 'in' the text, the separability of the text's 'inside' from its 'outside' (text from reader, text from context), the objective reality of history, and so forth. Deconstruction rejects the notion that the origin (*arche*), whatever its form (the author, God, the signified), should be given any sort of priority; it denies that there is an origin in any substantial sense. (The signified is always another signifier; the author is the product of his or her texts; every writing is a rereading; every reading a rewriting, and so forth) (Aichele 1995: 130).

It is important, however, to recognize that deconstruction is not a synonym for destruction. The word is *deconstruction*, that is, it is a qualification of the word, "construct." The literary critic, so the argument goes, intends not to destroy the text or negate the effect of language, spoken or written. Rather, the deconstructor attempts to analyze the meaning, that is, to tease out the strands of its varied textual claims. Language, in postmodern terms, is understood to be a *construct* of tribalism, of cultures, ancient and modern. As a construct it is therefore entirely relative to the particular language user and has no implications of permanency or universal

conditions. It is the duty of the deconstructor, then, to “break down” language into its constituent truth claims for the purpose of exposing its biases and the limited nature of the discourse. In terms of the concept of analysis, or of “breaking down” the meaning, an analogy from the practice of building a house may prove helpful. The construction of a house involves the laying of a foundation and the erection of a superstructure. This compares to the prominence of foundationalism in Western philosophical tradition. Is deconstruction, then, the destruction of the house? Some think so but actually deconstructionism does not demolish the house leaving only a pile of debris. Rather, the deconstructionist methodically takes the house apart piece by piece and section by section. Then he reconstructs it along the lines that he deems suitable to him or the interpretative community of which he is a part. The foundationalists, of course, prefer the original structure (in this analogy); the deconstructionist the renovation. But the deconstructor does not then move into the newly renovated building. That would simply mean that he is just another foundationalist (a completely unacceptable premise to the postmodernist). Instead, he perpetually takes apart and reassembles the building materials into yet another rendition of a structure *ad infinitum*. For him, it becomes a perpetual exercise of replacing the logocentric truth claims that have long prevailed in the West with the multiple and peculiar interpretations of various community traditions and preferences. But these interpretations are always being reformulated as community traditions change. It is in this fashion, then, that the work of postmodern deconstructionism typically proceeds.

But Deconstructionism is not altogether void of value for Christian hermeneutics either for it is certainly true that the meaning of a text does not lie on the surface of its printed page. Even Peter found some of Paul’s writings difficult to understand (2 Peter 3: 15-16). Thus, it seems obligatory for Christians to acknowledge that what the apostles wrote, and what their readers perceive as the intent of their writings, do not always intersect at the point of common understanding. This is one of the reasons why the assistance of the Holy Spirit is so important

as a necessary component for hermeneutics for Christians. The question here, however, is whether deconstructionism itself has any value for the Christian worldview. Put another way, should deconstructionism also be a component of hermeneutics as practiced by Christians? The value of deconstructionism for Christians, at least in a limited way, may be that it can provide for hermeneutics a postmodern tool for getting at the meaning of the sometimes obscure texts and even hidden agendas of authors. Foucault brings to the surface some interesting features regarding the significance of authorship at this point.

An author serves as a name for a theorem, an effect, an example or a syndrome. . . . We [literary critics_{NLM}] ask authors to answer for the unity of the works published in their names; we ask that they reveal [deconstructionism as applied by the critic_{NLM}] or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work; we ask them to reveal their personal lives, to account for their experiences and *the real story that gave birth to their writings*. The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality (1972: 222, italics added).

Reading strategies for Christians, likewise, should take into account the author's intent to "link with reality" therefore making it a significant part of that interpretative community's understanding of texts. One of the authors of the Postmodern Bible points out that deconstructionism can therefore be an important dimension of such a strategy.

Deconstructionist reading practices can uncover many problematic issues within the interpretative community's discourse without losing sight of the unique concerns of that discipline. . . . And deconstruction can provide openings within historical-critical discourse so that oppressed voices can speak and, if heard, transform the discourse of the discipline (Aichele 1995: 64).

Adam reports that one scholar, Cornell West, who works in the fields of philosophy and theology, has suggested in his lectures at Yale a convenient way to summarize the essence of postmodernism. He has proposed that we approach postmodernism as 'antifoundational,

antitotalizing, and demystifying.’ The following is her recapitulation of West’s summary:

Postmodernism is antifoundational in that it resolutely refuses to posit any one premise as *the* privileged and unassailable starting point for establishing claims to truth. It is antitotalizing because postmodern discourse suspects that any theory that claims to account for everything [the long sought after “theory of everything”^{NLM}] is suppressing counterexamples, or is applying warped criteria so that it can exclude recalcitrant cases. Postmodernism is also demystifying: it attends to claims that certain assumptions are ‘natural’ and tries to show that these are in fact ideological projections (1995: 5).

I will follow the analysis of West except I will change his order for purposes of this work.

There follows a somewhat extended analysis of his examples.

1.2.1. Detotalization: Death of the Author

The move toward the detotalization of interpretation did not begin with Derrida or Foucault, the two names most associated with postmodernism, particularly its literary origins. It began with the radical German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche whose influence on both is obvious in their writings. Nietzsche’s madman first informed modern Europeans that God was dead. God was dead because metaphysics was dead. Kant had seen to that. “It only remained for Nietzsche to work out the implications of God’s demise for language and interpretation. One consequence, however, was immediately apparent [and remains so^{NLM}]: without God, the world has no ultimate meaning (Vanhoozer 1998: 130).” Therefore, humans are alone in the cosmos and whatever meaning they find they must create for themselves.

Once God, the Divine Author, was dead it could only be a matter of time before the human author died also. In the worldview once dominated by Christianity God was seen as the Author of all the compositions of reality, the Creator, originator and authenticator. But his demise, an obituary announced by Nietzsche, affirmed by postmodernism, and also declared in theological circles through the writings of Thomas Altizer, left humans on their own, free to create their

own “reality” in whatever way they wished. This death of *the Author* by postmodern literary critics was necessary, they claimed, if they were to free themselves from the tyranny of the text. Therefore, liberation for postmodern man would not be possible without doing away with the creator of the text, the author. But it would not do to kill the *human* author and leave the *Divine Author* still “totalizing” human existence. How different all this is from the situation of Christians whose dependence on the *Divine Author* is so fundamental and necessary.

While the author’s control of the meaning in texts has been challenged since at least the time of the Enlightenment, especially the authority of biblical authors, postmodernism has taken that challenge to the level of the significance of language itself, creating for Christianity a crisis of belief as regards the reliability of its own texts. This is not necessarily a cause for consternation, however, because Christianity has been challenged in this way before by what is now considered traditional literary theory. Yet, while such theory has seemed at first detrimental to Christian faith, in time it has afforded benefits for Christian ideology as well, and so may postmodern literary theory in days to come. After all, Christian scholars also benefit from the methodology of historical critics in those times when their approach, which is characteristically atomistic in outcome, becomes more holistic instead.

Nonetheless, some critics have gone to the extreme of challenging *the very value of language itself* as a means of communication. This is best understood if we take the time to note the original purposes of literary criticism before delving more deeply into the specifics of the later postmodern literary criticism. Literary criticism was initially an effort to evaluate the author’s intent and as such it served a useful role in helping interpreters discover meaning. Subsequently, however, the study of sources (the origin of ideas) was added. Still more recently, in postmodern hands (such as those of Gadamer and Stanley Fish), postmodern literary criticism has moved beyond the author’s intention to the reader’s interpretation (Reader Response) (Krentz 1975: 51).

The term, “detotalization,” then, is another postmodern neologism, one that has to do with

the systematic removal of the significance of the author's intent. Since the author is not present when one reads the text, the postmodernist asserts that he is dead so far as the text is concerned (Adam 1995: 154). In this new environment, the authorship of all books is at issue, particularly books such as the Bible which serve as the basis for Jewish and Christian metanarratives. Such books are particularly offensive to the radical scholars because they represent a "totalizing" way of viewing reality. An example would be the Decalogue of Moses. As someone has pointed out, "those are *commandments* not suggestions." But that is just the point. Commandments are considered part of the old tyranny of the text which the postmodern reader finds unacceptable and from which he or she wishes to be delivered. For postmoderns, the really bad thing is not the breaking of divine commandments but the authority of *absolutist interpretation*.

All this presents a problem for those who may be more interested in arriving at the intention of a particular author, rather than the "play" of the text. Adam responds: "Postmodern criticism cannot accept any system of knowledge as absolute or foundational; it cannot accept the premise that some body of knowledge, or subject of knowledge, constitutes a unified totality; and it cannot accept mystifying claims that any intellectual discourse is disinterested or pure" (1995: 15). If such a position is right, of course, it would mean that God could not have revealed Himself to humanity in a written or spoken form that is in any way disinterested or pure since no such revelation is possible without the use of human language which is, by definition, impure.

Foucault, an originator of many of the leading ideas of postmodernism, also demands the irrelevancy of the author. He maintains that the author is a hindrance to a free society who, from his position of privilege, represents a system of oppression. "The coming into being of the notion of 'author' constitutes the *privileged* moment of individualization in the history of ideas, knowledge, literature, philosophy, and the sciences. . ." (1994: 205, italics added). For Foucault the sufficiency of writing is all that is worth preserving. The author is absent and unavailable in any case. Free from the author's intent the reader can, indeed, *must* make what he will of the written

text. The text must be sufficient because after the writing is finished the author becomes unnecessary.

Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject [author NLM] cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of *the dead man* in the game of writing. None of this is recent; criticism and philosophy took note of the disappearance – or death – of the author some time ago (Foucault 1994: 206-207, italics added).

Foucault does not seem to notice that in denigrating the role of the author, whose presence for the writing of the text is obviously necessary, he has also devalued the text for if the author is unnecessary why not his writing as well? This attitude toward authors and texts has carried over into the universities, particularly in America, in the widely noted revulsion that many educators seem to feel for the “great books” of Western civilization. In his highly acclaimed book Allan Bloom calls this attitude the “closing of the American mind.” (1987: 379-382).

How and why there should have been this development in the function and use of language is not clear. Postmodernism itself is *totalizing* in its prohibitions of any meaning that is objective and true (Anderson 1990: 91). This new movement has completely reversed axioms that have been a part of Western cultural understanding for centuries. The educational process itself is based on a stable understanding of language and yet all this has now changed. Adam, herself in apparent sympathy with the aims of postmodern literary analysis, presents some helpful contrasts which emphasize the difference between the modern way of approaching language and the postmodern way:

Postmodernists will not claim privileged access to the truth, but will simply claim to have provided a provocative reading of the topics they engage. Where modern criticism is absolute, postmodern criticism is relative; where modern knowledge is universal,

unified, and total, postmodern knowledge is local and particular; where modern knowledge rests on a mystified account of intellectual discourse, postmodern knowledge acknowledges various forces that are ostensibly external to intellectual discourse that nonetheless impinge on the entire process of perceiving, thinking, and of reaching and communicating one's conclusions. Nothing is pure; nothing is absolute; nothing is total, unified, or individual (1995: 15-16).

Veith has a similar assessment of the postmodern resistance to positions of truth and objectivity: "Postmodernists base this new relativism and the view that all meaning is socially constructed on a particular view of language. . . . postmodernism as a coherent intellectual discipline has developed out of literary criticism (of all things)" (1994: 50-51). The problem, according to postmodern literary critics, is that language cannot render truth about the world in an objective way (Veith 1994: 50-51).

Thus, language is impotent to describe objective reality while God and human authors are deceased. What then remains? All that is left is the reader as we see in Stanley Fish and his reader response criticism. While Fish maintains that he does not teach relativism, he does insist that texts are unintelligible in themselves and that the meaning of a text is nothing but the effect it has on the individual reader. Fish insists that reader-response is what constitutes the meaning of a text (1980: 303-321).

But is not the authority of a text, after all, the authority of its author? Not so, say the postmodernists. The author is dead. But if the author is dead what does this say about the text? Is it not also diminished?

1.2.2. Antifoundationalism: Diminution of the Text

The death of the author seems an extreme conclusion to many. Postmodernism, therefore, is radically different from modernism and premodernism. How can we have literature at all, some ask, biblical or otherwise, without an author? It is important to understand, however, that

the structuralists and poststructuralists, among radical literary critics, are not affirming the death of the author *before* he or she writes but *after* he or she writes. They maintain that it is the text, after all, not the author, that remains. But to what end does it remain? Is it not also greatly diminished in importance as well? The new critics deny this. They maintain that since the text is what remains, the author's intention is of no importance whatsoever.

Perhaps the most influential of . . . biblical studies is new criticism, sometimes called 'close reading,' a method that operates with three major assertions. First, attention is to be placed on the biblical text as an object of beauty and meaning, *not on the author*. It is the text, not the one who wrote it, that is the focus of interpretation. . . The text is not a means to get at an understanding of the identity, thought, and life of the author or anything else outside the text itself. Meaning and reference are both internal to the text. This assertion flies directly in the face of the efforts of historical criticism . . . Second, . . . new criticism eliminates the intentional fallacy by affirming that the biblical text, not the author, is the source and judge of the propriety of an interpretation. No importance is placed on the intention of the author . . . Third, for some new critics, although not for all, meaning is a function of the position a text holds within a literary context. Texts have cultural fields of reference that impact their meaning . . . the search is for the specific meaning of a text that, in part, may be aided by reference to the larger semantic field and discourse of values existing in the surrounding culture. But it is the meaning of a text that comes from within its own narrative reality, not its location in some external field of discourse, that is of primary importance (Perdue 1994: 240-241). [This is called 'text immanent' exegesis, "in which the text has a life of its own apart from the author" (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 212).]

From the above it has become clear that some schools of postmodern literary theory have replaced the age-old hermeneutical emphasis on an author's intent with an emphasis on the structure of the text itself. While this may be deemed the only thing they can do since the author

is no longer available for dialogue it is actually a diminution of the text because, in effect, it negates the author's intent as a necessary component of what makes a text a text. This is a significant development in literary theory, of course, at least insofar as it affects the ongoing debate engendered by structuralists and poststructuralists. But more is at stake than the disappearance, and thus, irrelevancy of the human author for if the influence of human authors on their writings is to be ignored so also may be the influence of the Divine Author (that is, God himself) on the writers of Scripture. Such indifference to God's influence on biblical writers is problematic because it is clearly a biblical claim that these writers received and passed on to their readers the intent of the Divine Author. This obviously has theological implications (See 2 Timothy 3: 16; 2 Peter 1: 21).

However, one must not think that any of this is lost on the thinking of radical literary critics. They are not only aware that the absence of God as Ultimate Author is a result of their theory they actually find fulfillment in its liberating effect. Thus, while freedom beckons, ultimate meaning is postponed, if not altogether lost, with the death of God as the author of life. Roland Barthes writes that "once the author is distanced, the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes entirely futile." He sets forth the despair of finding meaning which now pervades the field of literary criticism:

We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single 'theological meaning' (the message of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture. . . life merely imitates the book, and this book itself is but a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed. . . To assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing. . . . Thereby literature (it would be better, from now on, to say writing), by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world-as-text) a 'secret' i.e., an

ultimate meaning, liberates an activity we may call countertheological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning *is finally to refuse God* and his hypostases, reason, science, the law (Barthes 1986: 53-54).

It has been established, then, that postmodern critics see no place for the author once the text is composed. But it is not clear that they need the text either. What is evident is that the text has a diminished importance because postmoderns now go to the text not to *discover* the meaning that is inherent *in* the text but to *create* a meaning *out* of it that has some significance for their own lives. [In this sense, they produce a meaning that *overrides* the meaning that was once significant for the author who composed it.] They distinguish this change in reading strategy with the use of the Greek terms, “*poiesis*,” and “*mimesis*.” The latter term is descriptive of traditional literary theory, that is, the reader goes to the text to discover its *meaning*. The former term (*poiesis*), on the other hand, is indicative of what is happening in poststructuralist literary theory: *the reader makes or produces meaning for texts* (not *the* meaning for there is no such thing for postmodernists). We are told that this is because the reader despairs of the supposed instability of the text and is thus left no recourse but to create his or her *own* meaning. For postmodernists, “The burden of the Real is lifted; instead of having to slavishly imitate, humans are free to create, to become ‘like gods.’ Interpretation as *poiesis* (making, producing) replaces interpretation as *mimesis* (copying, imitating)” (Vanhoozer 1998: 136).

Previously, we observed that postmodernists assert the author’s death. Thus, being delivered from the author’s influence, readers are then free to use texts in whatever way they deem sufficient to satisfy their personal or community interest. However, this will not do for those who accept the authority of Scripture. They approach the biblical text *differently*. They approach it not to escape its meaning but to comply with it, not so much to judge the text but rather to be judged of it. In other words, they approach the text not to be free of the author’s intentional control of its meaning or to proclaim *his* death but to die *themselves* that Christ might reign in their

conscious lives. It is in this way that they apply the principle of the Cross to their reading. “He who would save his life will lose it; he would lose his life *for my sake* shall save it” (Matthew 16:24-25, italics added).

For hundreds of years the idea of stable meaning based on foundational assumptions had prevailed. With the coming of postmodernism, however, confidence in foundationalism has given way to the development of an antifoundationalist mentality. This, in turn, has nullified the sense of certainty for postmoderns in any kind of claim to the possession of universal truth including, of course, the truth claims of Christian theology. The importance of this loss is significant as the following definitions make clear: “The basic foundationalist argument is that there must be a basis for all truth claims . . . [It _{NLM}] is the theory of knowledge that affirms the need for certain foundational principles as the basis for all thought.” In logic these principles are known as “first principles such as the law of noncontradiction” (Geisler 1999: 259). According to Lakeland, foundationalism is “the philosophical and theological conviction that there are beliefs or experiences that are in themselves beyond doubt, and upon which systems of belief and understanding can thus be built with certainty” (1997: 126).

It is this understanding of foundationalism that postmodernism lays aside in order to attain freedom from totalizing metanarratives. Sometimes they seek to accomplish freedom from foundationalism in rather technical ways all of which have to do with the nature of language. Thus, the diminution of the text occurs because the literary critic arbitrarily determines that semiotics (the science of signs and what they signify) is more important than semantics (the relationship of signs within a text). Put another way, this means that since the codes of the signs are impersonal and arbitrary they signify whatever one wishes them to and therefore the sentence is a construction of the code-maker not an entity in its own right. Postmodernists are convinced that “. . . the *distinction* between semantics and semiotics is the key to the whole problem of language” (Vanhoozer 1998: 204). Language is therefore an arbitrary system of differential signs

that makes deconstructionism necessary so that readers might be free to construct meaning as they see fit.

As the problem with language has developed there has been a progression, some would say *regression*, of postmodern literary positions. The older literary criticism occupied itself with the intent of the author because it was understood that such was the key to discovery of meaning. This later development featured an emphasis on structuralism. Structuralism, as I have indicated, is therefore no longer occupied with an author's intent. Rather, the structuralists have occupied themselves instead with an emphasis on the integrity of the text's linguistic and literary conventions. They came to believe that language was a "self-enclosed system of signs." "The hope of the structuralists was not to determine what authors meant to say . . . but rather what their statements *meant*. By identifying the presentation patterns of various texts, the Structuralists believed they could scientifically discern 'conventional codes' or 'rule-governed processes' that were typical of human communication" (Chapell 1996: 7).

Later still, poststructuralists (and this is where postmodernism took a firmer hold in the process) came to believe that language was essentially *unstable*. Thus, they moved away from the text entirely and focused on the reader and his *location*, social, historical, and theological. They concluded that the reader's effect on the text was more important than the text's effect on the reader. Thus, interpretation becomes a struggle with the text, a means of exercising control, the imposition of the reader's will to power over the original will to power of the author. Examples of this struggle indicate a heightened tension when the authors of the texts being read were themselves initiators of aggressive ideology such as Marx, Nietzsche, Freud or Heidegger (Thiselton 1992: 471-472).

It is beyond dispute that there is a problem with language. Authors *are* absent. Were they not they could tell us what their words meant and thus negate the need for interpretation. Words alone are therefore ambiguous and completely dependent on context. The word "hot" is an

example. Does it refer to the temperature, a tennis player who is winning all his or her matches, or a man or woman who is full of wrath? These are only a few of the possibilities. There is a sense in which Derrida is right. Meaning is postponed (*differance*). One must therefore discern, as J. L. Austin of Oxford contends, whether a speech-act is locutionary (the utterance of words, e.g., saying the word, “hello”), illocutionary (what we do in saying something, e.g., greeting, promising, commanding), or perlocutionary (what we bring about by saying something, e.g., such as shouting the word, “fire!” in a crowded building) (1962: 94-132). All this and more constitute the problem with language. But is the postmodern “cure” worse than the “disease?” Does the problem of language require that we do away with foundational ideas that have sustained culture for centuries?

Murphy, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, thinks so. She gives up on foundationalism altogether. She believes that it is at an end in every field, including science, and that what has made it so is the recognition that “scientific ‘facts’ are ‘theory laden.’ For example, she asserts that “to describe an observation as say, a crater, is already to have a theory about its cause” (1996: 93).

With postmodern literary theory, then, we come to the end of logocentrism and its foundationalist implications. Instead, we end with a text that is limited to its social location and indeterminate in meaning. Accordingly, there is no stable context from which to determine meaning in the text. Without that, the text is diminished and the reader free to create his own meaning. This does not mean that the postmodernist is free of foundations, however, for the outcome of his theory is that new ones are being created upon which are rising the edifices of postmodern literary theory. The conundrum facing the West, therefore, is whether these new foundations of postmodern literary theory will replace the empirical foundations of the past. Perhaps what it all comes down to, then, in this and related matters, is “the will to power” of the reader.

1.2.3. Demystification: Reading Against the Text

We come now to what postmodernism is really about in practice, that is, the power of the reader to determine his or her own reality. The postmodern reader suspects that every text veils the author's will to power, that it is his or her attempt to impose a reality on others that serves either his or her interests or those of the community of which he or she is a part. We see this principle also at work in redaction criticism in biblical studies. In that discipline it is assumed that the biblical author is rewriting or refashioning texts in order to advance the agenda of his faith-community. In postmodern literary theory this alleged *hidden* agenda of the biblical writer determines the need for a "hermeneutics of suspicion." The task of the reader, according to this theory, is to "demystify" the text, that is, to remove the mystery of the author's intention so that his "will to power," (a legacy of Nietzsche) might be revealed.

Some in postmodernism call this development in literary theory the Second Enlightenment. The resource for such a judgment is the discovery that metanarratives have been used by "white European males" in the past to justify the suffering of the disenfranchised as the necessary price that must be paid in order to achieve "progress." What is really going on, however, the postmodernists insist, is oppression. The goal of reading, then, is no longer that of the mere accumulation of knowledge but that of exposing the will-to-power that is allegedly concealed in the text in order to free readers from its oppressive metanarrative and thus, ultimately, to reframe Western narratives so that they reflect marginalized interests. How this works out in history can be seen in this example:

Ludwig Feurbach (1804-1872) was the pioneer [of the hermeneutic of suspicion NLM], arguing that 'God' is really a projection of our best human qualities on an infinite screen; theology is anthropology writ large. Karl Marx (1818-1883) followed by showing how social arrangements reflect the hidden interests of the reigning class. Sigmund Freud (1856-1940) demonstrated that underlying human behavior were unconscious

motivations, some with moral import. And Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) saw behind culture and morality the desire for power. What unites these diverse thinkers is their desire to unmask what is hidden, to bring to light that which secretly oppresses, in order to set humanity free (Knight 1997: 57).

So then, readers are set free to create their own reality, “to make meaning.” This poiesis replaces the mimesis of the modern era. In part, at least, this postmodern understanding is derived from Kant, the philosopher of modernity. Kant insisted on absolute intellectual autonomy. . . He argued that the self does not so much *discover* what is objectively out there in the world, but *projects order creatively* upon the world (Kant 1990: 360-364). In Kant’s philosophy, “human consciousness begins to be not only the key for discovering reality, but *the source* of reality itself” (Carson 1996: 67).

Of course, the result of individuals deciding for themselves what the text means, rather than what the author intended, has always been understood to be the practice of eisegesis. One reads into or out of the text one’s own presuppositions and biases. When eisegesis becomes a general practice, however, there will be as many “meanings” as there are readers (Fish 1980: 305-306). The result is reader pluralism. Gone, therefore, are the foundations of a few strong metanarratives that have undergirded Western civilization. In their place, at best, are the narratives of a multiplicity of individuals and diverse interpretative communities. There is no unity of purpose in such pluralism. “So not only must the notion of univocal meaning in texts be abandoned, but because meaning finally resides in the interpreter, there are as many meanings as there are interpreters, even if interpreters are multiplied indefinitely” (Carson 1996: 74).

However, not every response by the reader is so extreme. With the metaphysical shift away from the author, Gadamer and Ricoeur have moved to a mediating position of engaging with the “horizon of the text.” Thiselton, an evangelical, uses their insights in positive and helpful ways in his works and even Gadamer is not the most radical of the Reader Response critics. He, at least,

holds to some meaning in the text in seeking the fusion of horizons. Moreover, he believes that the act of reading is a co-creation with the author (Gadamer 1999: 359-362). In the main, however, Reader Response is a negation of the author's intentionality and an effort to work away from his alleged bias. The reader reads "against the text."

By demystification, then, is meant the formulation of reading strategies for postmoderns that enable readers to be free of what they consider to be 'oppressive texts,' especially books of authority such as the Bible. It is true, of course, that when readers of a certain socio-economic status (such as the upper class) once upon a time discovered texts in the Bible that seemed to support their social practice of holding slaves they did not hesitate to press such texts into service as "proof- texts," as a means of justifying their oppressive behavior. What they did not do, however, was to reject the *authority* of the biblical text. But that was under the old hegemony of the Christian worldview and all that has changed. The new use of texts is to read "against the text." This means that postmodern readers do not hesitate to jettison the authority of the text if it does not support their particular ideology. One sees this particularly at work in the publications of many of the more extreme feminist and liberationist authors. However, such a practice is not confined to the radical left. Members of the ideological right have also been known to do so as well if certain texts seem to argue against their partisan views. The "will to power" in such circumstances, in any case, is that of the reader and not just that of the author.

Reading "against the text," is therefore an exercise in the raw use of power. It is thus more of a subjectivist construct of the reader's own imagination than the discovery of information as was once the oldest purpose of reading. Here we see the unique contribution of radical postmodernism in all its boldness. Now, reading has become an *adversarial* relationship between reader and text. But it is one-sided in nature and in outcome. The author is now dumb; he or she cannot protest any conclusion the reader assumes. Thus, the will to power in the reader overcomes the past will to power of the author. The result, of course, is that the

communication of the text can be neither appropriated or appreciated. This is similar to what happens when one person will not listen to another. One's disposition in such a circumstance is so set that one *cannot* or *will not* hear the other person because one simply does not tolerate opinions other than one's own. For him or her, the content of the discourse is not what is important. If the speaker happens to say something that is in general agreement with the listener, well and good, if not, the listener simply substitutes his or her own thought. In any event, the speaker is irrelevant. With this analogy in mind, should readers exercise this power of adversarial reading against *all* texts? What about the texts of the postmodernists? Should we not read *against* their texts as well? Is the collective will to power of some interpretative community always behind every text? This is what Reader Response literary theory is about although some have used it in a more innocuous fashion. Others have dubbed it "radical hermeneutics," an extreme approach to language that ". . . recognizes the subjectivity of interpretation, and how much it is shaped by the cultures and subcultures to which the interpreter belongs" (Carson 1996: 19).

Jacques Ellul sees all this as "the humiliation of the word." He questions whether any culture can long survive that does not have respect for the word, spoken or written. He responds to the hermeneutic of suspicion with barely restrained sarcasm:

There is no meaning. Everything in a text is reduced to structural relationships. This amounts to negating the word that escapes the scientific method. Since this method is law, according to the procedure followed in every science, let's exclude as unreal and unimportant anything that cannot be subordinate or an object [the word reduced to the state of an object, that is, a scientific object NLM]. For despite Edgar Morin's question, scientists still are the subject (even when they pretend not to be) and nature the object. We have not yet reached the stage of humility in our relationship with the word! (1985: 165- 166).

Postmodernists, then, claim to know nothing at all when they approach texts. Meaning is

therefore undecidable. Once the text is demystified what is left? There is nothing or no one to whom the postmodernists are accountable. Accordingly, Vanhoozer, although he attempts to be very balanced in his work and in his assessment of postmodernism, concurs in essence with Ellul. "It would appear that postmodern readers are condemned to unbelief. The new morality of literary knowledge resists believing *in* anything, even in one's own interpretations" (1998: 186).

Vanhoozer sees the problem as a loss of meaning for the text. His book, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (1998) is a response to the Stanley Fish's book, *Is There a Text in this Class?* (1980). Vanhoozer's work is an extensive, almost exhaustive survey of the complex field known as postmodern literary theory. His summary of the significance of the problem of worldviews based on metanarratives (such as that which is represented by Christianity) and the new situation created by postmodernism is revealing. He writes:

Two contrasting interpretations of interpretation now compete for the soul of Western culture. One seeks to decipher and to locate a stable determinate meaning; the other affirms the free-play of signs and gives up the search for some vantage point outside language. The one seeks understanding; the other tries to avoid being taken in. According to the first view, readers must stop the hermetic drift and try to swim ashore. According to the second, Derridean view, readers must accept and perhaps enjoy the free-floating play of meaning. From this vantage point, those who make knowledge claims are the ones who are immoral and irresponsible [because they accept the so-called tyranny of the text NLM]. In the new morality of literary knowledge, honesty means confessing the artificiality of one's interpretations (1998: 135-136).

My own survey of the principle tenets of postmodernism has been brief but perhaps comprehensive enough to show the peril that it presents to all metanarratives, especially the one that has shaped the Christian worldview. Some of the ideas, according to Walter Anderson (1990: 27-28), are so outrageous that it is imagined that the movement will be short lived. This may be

the case but Carson does not think so.

If here and there a few thinkers suggest that during the past three or four years postmodernism became a spent force, several things must be said in reply. First, no other worldview has come along to displace it; second, its influence on certain disciplines is still in the ascendancy . . . ; and third, the sheer diversity of Western culture tends to nourish a kind of *de facto* postmodernity. In short, rumors of postmodernity's demise are greatly exaggerated (1996: 22).

Carson's assessment suggests that it is worthwhile to examine some of the paradigm shifts that have occurred in culture as a result of the influence of postmodernism. So pervasive has been the influence of this literary movement that belief patterns have been changed in significant ways. We turn to those changes next.

A Change in Belief Systems: Paradigm Shifts

2.1. From Universalism to Relativism

For centuries the traditional institutions of Western civilization were led by those who were committed to the principle that objective truth predicated on universal reason could banish ignorance and make it possible for humanity to enjoy inevitable progress (Grenz 1996: 40). That commitment was so entrenched in the culture that intellectual leaders pursued the common goal of aspiring to a “theory of everything,” a satisfactory explanation of phenomena that would exhaust all the possibilities of knowledge (Davies 1992: 165-167). As late as the American revolution in the eighteenth century, its Declaration of Independence proclaimed that there were certain truths that were “self evident,” that is, commonly assumed by all.

In recent decades, however, all this has changed. No longer is Western culture unified in its understanding of truth and reason. Instead, there is a pervasive pluralism that asserts itself in epistemological incoherency and moral ambiguity. “In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. In eschewing the Enlightenment myth of inevitable progress, postmodernism replaces the optimism of the last century with a gnawing pessimism” (Grenz 1996: 7). The old epistemology of an unified principle of rationalism has been replaced by a network of diverse cultural intellectual and pragmatic codes that serve as general assumptions for the developing postmodern consensus. In the place of a foundation of unified principles of truth there now stand diverse “webs” of belief systems that represent various networks of community relationships throughout the world. The networks themselves are based on the common experiences of its constituents thus making for a “holistic” relationship of public and private opinions. Holism is “ ‘a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience’ ”

(Quine 1953: 42).

But there is more. The web is continually expanding with ever widening connections of “equally consistent,” yet often competing belief systems. How this came to pass is only now becoming better known. The major contributor to this expanding development of web epistemology is W. V. O. Quine. His is the view that has been most influential in the shaping of the epistemological belief system that now prevails for increasing numbers of people in the postmodern world. Before many people knew that postmodernism was a viable movement Quine had already developed his “web” or “holist” epistemology, its first appearance being that which he published in an article entitled: “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” Beginning with an analysis of Kant’s two dogmas of empiricism, the analytic and the synthetic, Quine determined that they were “ill founded” and should therefore be abandoned. Accordingly, he concluded that the idea of an objective world is actually a figment of human imagination. Therefore, the best that can be done is to construct a network of interconnected and yet independent fields of knowledge that will displace the old empirical model of Enlightenment thinking. Quine explains:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric [a web of interconnected relationships NLM] which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails reevaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections — the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field. Having reevaluated one statement we must reevaluate some others, which may be statements of logical

connections themselves. But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole (1953: 42-43).

Murphy thinks that nothing has so contributed to postmodern epistemology as has this unique Anglo-American contribution of Quine. His work, which was originally published as an essay in 1951, along with the death of noted literary theorist Ludwig Wittgenstein that same year, marks for her the beginning of the postmodern period and the end of the modern period (Murphy 1996: 87). Ever since, Murphy contends, it is impossible to view knowledge in the old way as settled truth. Instead, as Quine maintained, there are *boundaries of experience* that limit knowledge to webs of independent “fields of force” with “logical interconnections” that are linked only indirectly within the fields (Quine 1953: 43). Thus, knowledge is local rather than universal in essence. Foundationalism is therefore passe, truth has become relative, sources suspect, and reality has been replaced by social “fictions.”

The change from an earlier foundationalism of universal epistemological principles to postmodern webs of local belief systems is now widespread in Western culture and growing exponentially in influence. For example, its impact on theology can be seen in how it relates to the published works of systematic theology. Most works on systematic theology begin with “theological foundations” called prolegomena. But these foundations no longer appear in works originating from postmodern theologians. Considered anachronistic, they are now excluded (Murphy 1996: 99, 152) along with the works of other postmodern academicians. These changes indicate that a major paradigm shift is taking place which means, in the context of postmodernism, that Western culture has now accepted new models of epistemology in the place of those which once characterized premodernity and modernity.

Formerly, in the old system of foundationalism, objective truth as an epistemological foundation was assumed by the culture. However, as this belief system is no longer prevalent in postmodern epistemology the contrast between the old and the new is accentuated. A brief review of the meaning of objective truth by Beckwith and Koukl indicates how far culture has moved from the older model of universal objective truth.

1. The word *objective* in the phrase 'objective truth' does not refer to an unemotional, detached, or impersonal attitude. Truth is not an attitude. It is not *how* we know, truth is *what* we know.
2. *Objective* does not mean 'known by all' or 'believed by all.' Even if everyone believes a lie, a lie is still a lie. 'You don't find truth by counting noses.'
2. Objective does not mean 'publicly proved.' An objective truth could be privately known, for example, the location of a hidden treasure. It could also be *known* without being *proved*; to know is one thing, to give good proofs or reasons for our knowledge is another (1998: 80).

A rather homely explanation of objective truth follows from the same authors: "What *objective* means in 'objective truth' is 'independent of the knower and his consciousness.' 'I itch' is a subjective truth; 'Plato wrote the *Republic*' is an objective truth. 'I don't want to be selfish' is a subjective truth; 'I ought to be unselfish whether I want to be or not' is an objective truth" (1998: 80). One can see that the authors are using graphic, even earthy analogies, to drive home the idea that objective truth denotes what is *really* there. For example, in the case of Plato, the authors assert that a man named Plato actually lived and wrote the book *Republic*. Therefore, such a man and his book are not figments of human imagination.

Whether an idea can refer to what is real, rather than just the figment of someone's imagination, is one of the issues at stake in the clash of ideologies with which we are now engaged. This is an important issue because it determines a culture's view of reality. Terry Eagleton, a British literary critic, responds to the new situation with a reminder of how far

culture has moved from an earlier day. He writes that Western philosophy has always been “in a broader sense” logocentric and thus objectivistic. It is therefore

committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word,’ presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language and experience. It has yearned for the sign which will give meaning to all others – the ‘transcendent signifier’ – and for the anchoring, unquestionable meaning to which all our signs can be seen to point (‘the transcendent signified’). A great number of candidates for this role – God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, substance, matter and so on – have thrust themselves forward from time to time. Since each of these concepts hopes to *found* our whole system of thought and language, it must itself be beyond that system, untainted by its play of linguistic differences. It cannot be implicated in the very languages which it attempts to order and anchor. . . . (Eagleton 1983: 131).

Thus, a shift in thinking on this issue has taken place. Postmodernists do not accept *any* notion of universality or objective truth, especially that which is embedded in metaphysical metanarratives such as the Christian religion. Instead, they seem to agree with Lyotard who defined postmodernism as ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’ including, of course, religious ones. This is because “metanarratives tend to define and enforce totalities” (Adam 1995: 16). Christians, on the other hand, reject the postmodern idea that nothing is pure, total, or absolute. Instead, they begin with God himself who is unalloyed and therefore pure, total and absolute.

The paradigmatic shift from universalism to relativism has accentuated the polemical nature of such matters, inevitably creating ontological tensions, both secular and theological. For example, Descartes doubted many things and ultimately reduced his categories of things assured to a *single finite* certainty in his famous statement, “*Cogito ergo sum*” (“I think; therefore I am”). However, that certainty settled nothing in the cosmic scheme of things for God’s statement to Moses — “*I am that I am*” (Exodus 3: 14) — had already gone to a much grander and

more universal scale. Therefore, if the grand metanarrative of the existence of a self-revealing God has ontological validity, as Christians and Jews claim, then God's existence and his revelation are objectively true and real, that is, such things are not mere figments of human imagination. On the other hand, these things, if real, necessarily have implications for *all* persons, not just for those who hold to the Christian worldview. This is because metanarratives of revealed faith *are* totalizing in their terms; they are therefore universal in nature. Nevertheless, such ideas are preposterous to the postmodern mind; they are nonsense.

Postmodernists, accordingly, do not concern themselves with Cartesian certainty or the premise of God's eternal existence. For them, all such talk of universalism, whether it is the implied human affinity with Descartes' narrowly defined finiteness or the theological infinity of the Christian God is a "grand illusion" (Adam 1995: 16). The rejection of the principle of universalism, however, inevitably results in an atomistic or fragmented approach to life which is exactly what we have in postmodernism. Hence, postmodernism is not a worldview at all; it is the antipathy of worldviews. "Postmoderns reject the possibility of constructing a single correct worldview and are content to simply speak of many views and, by extension, many worlds" (Grenz 1996: 40).

Murphy agrees that notions of universalism, such as objective truth and historical facts, do not seem credible in our postmodern environment. But this does not mean that postmodern philosophers or literary critics have the last word. In her book, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism* (1996), she seeks a middle ground for philosophy and theology in the Quinian holist approach to epistemology. As a part of her review of how Western culture has moved from modernity to postmodernity, Murphy points out that the seeds of postmodernism were actually sown near the close of the modern period and that this eventually produced an epistemological harvest in the works of logical positivism and logical atomism. Before that, antipathy against objective truth began to show up in the writings of authors such as Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

This was also true of literary theorists who questioned whether language can even speak of God or the metaphysical at all. For example, A. J. Ayer, of logical positivist fame, insisted that language was limited as a means of expressing spiritual or metaphysical matters. He therefore presented three classifications of the *legitimate* use of sentences as reasonable objections to anything metaphysical: 1) Those that are empirically meaningful (the sky is blue); 2) Those that are true by definition (the sky is blue because the sky is blue); and 3) Those that are expressing human emotion (The blue sky makes me happy). Ayer maintained that since religious, metaphysical language did not fit any of those *legitimate* uses of language it was therefore utterly devoid of meaning (Ayer 1936: 40).

Of course, many in the heyday of modernity had asserted that it was not possible to speak or write of metaphysical things in a factually meaningful way. But does this mean that one cannot use language in a meaningful way at all to express ideas about God and things metaphysical? To the contrary, Ayer allowed for the use of such language as long as one acknowledged that it could have no more than emotive significance:

The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express — that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false. If, on the other hand, the putative proposition is of such a character that the assumption of its truth, or falsehood, is consistent with any assumption whatsoever concerning the nature of his future experience, then, as far as he is concerned, it is, if not a tautology, a mere pseudo-proposition. The sentence expressing it may be emotionally significant to him; but it is not *literally* significant (1936: 35, italics added).

Because such views as those expressed by Ayer are no longer given much credence in the new

situation, Murphy celebrates postmodernism's breaking apart of that consensus since this allows room once again for the epistemological legitimacy of metaphysical perspectives, albeit in new categories that make it possible to find a middle ground between modernity and postmodernity for discussing epistemological matters (1996:154-156).

Murphy's attempt to arrive at this middle ground between modernity and postmodernity, notwithstanding, the question remains: Can God, as the Scriptures declare, make himself known to humans in their own language forms so that both metaphysical and finite realities are affirmed or are the limitations of language such that any attempt of this nature is certain to fail? Put another way, is it so, as Ayer maintains, that all such attempts *must* end in futility because sentences that address metaphysical issues are simply not "literally significant?" The fact is that the tension that exists between those who hold to the premise that there are things that are objectively true, *even if metaphysical in nature*, and those who hold to the premise that there is *no* objective truth – only the fictions of human opinion – remains a problem for both modernity and postmodernity. The difference between them, however, is that in a postmodern age that tension has moved into cultural *communities* rather than culture at large and is being decided on the basis of whether or not a particular group (such as the Christian community) identifies with it.

The paradigmatic shift, then, is profound in its impact on late twentieth and early twenty-first century culture. Virtually all of Western culture and its institutions are affected by it. For example, Bloom writes that "almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative" (1987: 25). Accordingly, in literary circles the shift from universalism to relativism has moved from the authority of the author to the authority of the text to the disposition of the reader. In theology this is seen in the rejection by postmoderns of the method of historical criticism. In politics it is reflected in candidates who are more concerned with their media image than the substance of their political positions. In the universities the search for truth has given way to the demand for arbitrarily imposed "politically correct" social

conventions. In the postmodern culture, then, “truth” is entirely the prerogative of individual preference or community preference. Once in the West, if one wished to emphasize the truth of his statements before the presiding judge in a court room, he would swear before God with his hand on a Bible. In human relationships he would declare that he was speaking “gospel truth” rather than lying. This is no longer the case for postmoderns. Moreover, the shift from the *objective* authority of Scripture to the *relative* authority of the reader is now complete in most of Western culture. This is easily discerned in the works of postmodern writers, some of whom celebrate the change and speak pejoratively of those who still believe in objective truth. One of them, Stanley Hauerhaus, makes this statement as reported by Vanhoozer: “ ‘It is only biblical critics — and fundamentalists — who think that Scripture has an objective meaning’ ” (1998: 173).

What, then, has brought such a shift in thinking that whole epistemological systems are changed? Simply put, it is language. Put another way, the shift is caused by words. This is because the conviction grew that words are metaphors that speak “sideways” and thus they are inadequate for conveying any sense of that which is objectively true. They cannot express, in anything but a deferred way, that which is metaphysical, infinite or universal, say the postmodernists. Further, they insist, words are even more limited. Words are limited by other words. Relativism, in this case, becomes ever more entrenched in our culture when it is understood, as postmodernists would have it, that the meaning of words is constrained by *other* words (structuralism). As such they are “viciously self limiting. . . words themselves never have a referent other than to other words. . . . Language cannot in the nature of the case refer to objective reality” (Carson 1996: 73).

The shift from objectivity to relativity has been gradual and for this reason many are not yet aware of the radical nature of the change. Sometimes an interesting analogy helps. An example is the way that Anderson introduces a touch of humor into his discussion of postmodernity and its

relationship to objective reality. He relates an imaginary meeting of baseball umpires as they discuss balls and strikes. One says, 'There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way they are.' Another says, 'There's balls and there's strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em.' The third says, 'There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't *nothing* until I call 'em.' Anderson makes the application. "Here we have an objectivist and two kinds of constructivists. The second umpire is what I would call a mainstream constructivist, the third a postmodern radical" (1990: 75).

Language as a limiting mechanism, particularly the philosophy of language, has become the academic discipline for communicating the postmodern worldview. By the early 20th century, philosophy had centered on language as the best method by which to address philosophical problems. In time, this came to greatly affect the discipline of theological research as well. For example, as a tool of the hermeneutic of suspicion, the method of philosophy came to be regarded as the means by which one would uncover the "assumptions already implicit in a [theological NLM] worldview" (Murphy 1996: 37, 38). It may be assumed, given the prevailing mentality, that the "assumptions" uncovered would be considered "oppressive" in a postmodern environment.

Thus, there can no longer be confidence in claims of universal truth because the term, truth, after all, "is only a construction of language" (Veith 1994: 49). However, this diminishing of all categories of truth to the indeterminacy and instability of language has abstruse and even baneful effects on humanity. In this sense it serves as the ultimate reductionism of human significance because it shrinks one's capacity to get "outside oneself" in order to determine meaning for one's life. What ensues is the *modus operandi* of a person "playing his or her language games" of structuralism and poststructuralism, the outcome of which is that there is no settled ultimate meaning for his or her life. That person is therefore endlessly deconstructing and reconstructing his or her "reality" but finding no satisfactory purpose for the exercise. C. S. Lewis, in another context, that of modernity, saw that one's effort to free oneself from the rule of God in one's life

would have the inevitable effect of reducing one to the tyranny of one's own instincts. When that happened he saw that "men would not be men at all," they would become "artefacts." Humans might conquer nature and command their own little world but their "final conquest has proved to be the abolition of Man" (1944: 74).

The fulfillment of Lewis' assessment of the plight of humanity is even more evident in those postmodernist categories in which one establishes personal identity. Having pointed out that humans without access to the ultimate, that is, to God himself, would be reduced to their own impulses, Lewis went on to insist that such impulses, especially those that impinge on the preservation of the species, would "have to be controlled" (1944: 48-49). But this is the very thing that postmodernists refuse to do. Without an universal, ultimate reality why should they? In some circles, postmoderns even state that impulses (instincts) serve *as* identity. For example, some postmoderns insist that sexual orientation can be *equated* with personal identity. The words, "I am gay," for such persons, therefore, mean that the impulse to have sexual relations with the same sexual gender as one's own is "who he or she *is*" not what he or she does. Thus, the instinct of a person has become *the whole person* describing who he or she is at all times. This relativism only demonstrates more dramatically what is lost when categories of absolute truth and universal significance are abolished. In the Christian worldview, for example, a person derives his or her identity from God, the Creator. Identity is therefore not located in what one does whether it is his or her sexual orientation or occupation, but in what God himself has done in creating that person and endowing him or her with divine purpose according "to the image of God" (Genesis 1:27).

This ambiguity or confusion in identity in matters of sexuality is quite pertinent to the changes that are occurring since the introduction of postmodernism into the culture. We can see this at work in certain theologians, both those of moderate and conservative persuasions in the

Southern Baptist Convention. The conservatives, for example, have no hesitancy at all in declaring that homosexuality is sin as Scripture clearly indicates. By this, they do not mean that Scripture presents it as a worse category of sin than that of the practice of adultery or fornication by heterosexuals. Nor do they insist that it is less forgivable by God or members of Christ's church than heterosexual sin. But on the other hand, neither do they hesitate to call it what Scripture calls it: sin. A recent event in Southern Baptist life, however, reveals a different perspective by some moderates. For example, the moderate Richmond Theological Divinity School in Virginia recently accepted a practicing lesbian into its student body. One of the seminary's leading theologians, Professor William Leonard, has also justified and exonerated the decision of the divinity school to accept practicing homosexuals as candidates for the ministry. In a news article entitled: "Leonard Defends Admitting Gays to Divinity School," Leonard was asked whether "he considers homosexuality a sin." Initially, he declined to answer the question but then made this comment: "I don't think we need to talk about that." Later, he said: "Is homosexuality a sin? *That's for everyone to sort out individually*" (Leonard in Biblical Recorder, May 20, 2000: 1, 9, italics added). Leonard's answer is quite postmodern in essence for it assumes no objective standard and it posits a "truth" that is relative to the judgment of each individual.

The shift from universalism to relativism creates a dilemma for postmodern theologians as well. Some of them have begun looking for new methods that will bridge the perceived gap between universal truth claims and the ambiguities of relativism thus making effective communication to postmoderns possible. Murphy thinks that she has attained such a method. Following the work of Lakatos and MacInyre she call her method *historist-holism*. She thinks her method better than the older established foundationalism because it presents an alternative for those who are comfortable with neither modernity or postmodernity. This is how it works in her method: "I see a brown dog." Foundationalism provided that the reason she saw the dog is

because its presence is objective reality. But with postmodern epistemology she can no longer say that. It is a foundational statement and thus inadmissible by postmodernists. Rather, she points out that now one must say it this way: “I *seem* to be seeing a brown dog.” The latter sentence refers to one’s perception, the sense data that gives one the idea that something is there. “It is a safer way to think because it is indubitably true that there is the *appearance* of a brown dog” (1996: 91). Presumably, Murphy’s method is “historical” because at least her perception of the brown dog occurred in a time and place setting and it is “holist” because it functions within the boundaries of an experience that is epistemologically acceptable in the postmodern era. Experiential boundaries in postmodern epistemological theory are the periphery of “webs” or “networks” of knowledge derived from community relationships rather than universal notions of truth (Murphy 1996: 88-90).

There are also other ramifications for universalism and relativism in the refusal by postmodernists to find any kind of objective meaning in language. The outcome, though probably not intended, has the same effect as indifference to the text because the reader is ultimately left with the sense that he or she has no obligation to respond to it at all. Stanley Fish, for instance, argues that the reader’s response to a particular text is not *to* the meaning, (rather) it *is* the meaning (1980: 3). Following Wittgenstein, perhaps even taking some liberties with his ideas on language games, some postmoderns pronounce the idea of meaning itself pointless: “Those who do not believe that textual meaning is ‘there’ may feel free to invent it. . . . for hermeneutic non-realists, the primary obligation is to keep the ‘play’ of meaning going — to resist closure. . . . If meaning is not there, then there is nothing to which one can respond or be responsible” (Vanhoozer 1998: 393).

Without absolute truth, standards, morals, mores, and customs become relative, that is, they are based entirely on whatever is preferred by particular ethnic or religious subgroups of

culture. The result is multiculturalism. With multiculturalism every judgment is reduced to a cultural perspective. It is reported that “Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, English professor at Duke University and former president of the Modern Language Association, supports this claim: ‘There is no knowledge, no standard, no choice that is objective . . . Even Homer is a product of a specific culture, and it is possible to imagine cultures in which Homer would not be very interesting.’ Consequently, if no standard, knowledge, or choice is objective, then moral claims are relative as well” (Beckwith and Koukl 1998: 82).

But universalism, a word that is used interchangeably in this work with the term objective truth, does not mean infallibility of interpretation. Christians, after all, do not claim to know everything. They may not even be aware of some of the questions that are being asked in a given context. Still, objective truth exists (in the Christian worldview) whether or not it is fully apprehended by persons or even if not apprehended at all. The same is true for those who have been committed to the ethos of modernity. However, the easy confidence and intellectual hubris of modernity that has characterized those committed to the empirical truth claims of universal reason *was* misplaced. Nor is such confidence justified in those who hold the Christian worldview. Aquinas used reason as a way of knowing God but he never placed his complete confidence in it. That was reserved for faith. One of the benefits of postmodernism is therefore registered at this point. Volf explains:

The agenda of modernity has overreached itself. Its optimism about human capacities is misplaced and its assumption that there is a neutral standpoint wrong. There can be no indubitable foundation of knowledge, no uninterpreted experience, no completely transparent reading of the world. A cosmic or a divine language to express ‘what was the case’ is not available to us; all our languages are human languages, plural dialects growing on the soil of diverse cultural conditions and social conditions. . . . We have no access to ‘pure facts’ and we are incapable of reconstructing strictly objective

narratives of what actually transpired. . . the claim of universal truth often serves to give legitimacy to very particular interests. These interests can be noble, like the desire for universal peace in a world torn by war, but they can also be nasty, like the desire to preserve one's own privileged position of power. . . (1996: 243-244).

Volf's caveat notwithstanding, there remains no justification for ruling out universal or objective truth as a valid epistemological standard. While it is granted that fallen humans distort the handling of truth even as they distort other matters, that distortion does not prevent God from communicating what he will to whom he will when he will. After all, he *created* language as his gift to us in order that he might communicate with us through revelation and so that we might communicate with him through prayer. This is at least part of the meaning of being "created in God's image" (Genesis 1: 27). There is no compelling reason, then, to deny that God reveals truth to us even though the means for receiving the "treasure" of that truth resides in the "cracked pots" of a spiritually fallen humanity (2 Corinthians 4: 7).

But the question remains: is language a credible way to communicate objective truth in the postmodern era? The answer to that question goes to the issue of the reliability of authors and their texts, and of God and his revelation.

2.2. From Credibility to Incredulity

As I have indicated, premodern and modern people shaped their understanding of reality out of what they believed they had discovered in an objective and real world. They also used their writings to record their discoveries for their peers and for posterity. This gave authority to their texts and obliged their readers to interpret rightly what had been written in order to gain adequate understanding. Later, in the incipient stages of postmodernism, those who were called structuralists came to believe that "a text is meaningful *in itself* somewhat independently of the process by which it was composed and the intention of the author who composed it" (Richardson

and Bowden 1983: 551, italics added). Heretofore, critics had taken the diachronic approach (the horizons of different times as examined by the historical-critical method). Afterwards, however, literary theorists began to opt for the synchronic approach (focusing on the text's present ability to convey meaning). To accomplish this, they studied the relationship between semiotics and semantics. Following Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics* 1972), they called this method structuralism because Saussure had emphasized the social use of signs as arbitrary sequences of sounds and symbols peculiar to each language yet similar within certain language families.

Saussure taught that the brain functions according to certain patterns or structures. These structures as products of the brain make the organization of languages possible. "The language itself is not a function of the speaker. It is the product passively registered by the individual. It never requires premeditation, and reflexion enters into it only for the activity of classifying . . ." Language, therefore, is "a structured system" (1972: 14, 24-63). Saussure's work dealt with the mechanics of language both in speech and text.

Saussure's summary of his position emphasizes the difference between the signifier and the signified. He writes:

In the language itself, there are only differences. Even more important than that is the fact that, although in general a difference presupposes positive terms between which the difference holds, in a language there are only differences *and no positive terms*. Whether we take the signification or the signal, the language includes neither ideas nor sounds existing prior to the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonetic differences arising out of that system. In a sign, what matters more than any idea or sound associated with it is what other signs surround it. The proof of this lies in the fact that the value of a sign may change without affecting either meaning or sound, simply because some neighboring sign has undergone a change (1972: 118).

Structuralists therefore “seek to understand both the superficial structures of a text and its deep structures. . . . structure has to do with the interrelationship among the various elements within the text” (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 551). But structuralism did not long prevail as the method of choice among linguists. There soon followed post-structuralism and full flowered postmodernism. Though poststructuralists continued to accept the value of Saussure’s work for semiotics and semantics they abandoned the text *as the site for meaning* in order to locate meaning completely in the reader. Of course, this was also a transfer of power from the authority of the author and his text to the authority of the reader. The result is the various manifestations of Reader-Response hermeneutics.

With the authority of the reader, however, comes a new attitude toward texts. What had formerly been assumed as a neutral or objective or even pure commitment to truth on the part of the author has become suspect, the outcome of which is the hermeneutic of suspicion. The reader therefore adopts an attitude of incredulity toward all texts which, in turn, produces yet another example of paradigmatic shift, that is, the meaning of a text becomes no longer a construct of the author but of the reader. “The first question postmodernism addresses is not *what is there* or how we know what is there but how language functions *to construct meaning itself*. In other words, there has been a shift in ‘first things’ from being to knowing to constructing meaning [by the reader _{NLM}]” (Sire 1997: 175, italics added).

On the other hand, credibility is the legacy of the premodern and modern periods of history. It is the basic human trust that one places in narratives, metanarratives, and historical data. In a sense, then, it is not possible to read texts or listen to speech with comprehension unless one has an innate faith in the credibility of the one who is communicating. But postmodernism rejects the *sufficiency* of such credibility. Foucault leads the way. For him, following Nietzsche, language is the expression of a will to power and knowledge is its citadel. This and more he learned from

Nietzsche.

My relation to Nietzsche, or what I owe Nietzsche, derives mostly from the texts of around 1880, where the question of truth, the history of truth and the will to truth were central to his work. . . . The actual history of Nietzsche's thought interests me less than the kind of challenge I felt one day, a long time ago, reading Nietzsche for the first time. . . . What is the maximum of philosophical intensity, and what are the current philosophical effects to be found in these texts? That, for me, was the challenge of Nietzsche (1994: 446-447).

From Nietzsche, whose influence on postmodernism is profound, Foucault experiences a "rupture" of his thinking which moved him away from Husserl's phenomenology, a philosophy then current among his peers (1994: 438). Phenomenology was a philosophical movement that emphasized the "pure structures of consciousness" (Richardson and Bowen 1983: 444). Foucault rejected the inference of neutrality that such a philosophy engendered and moved instead into a new understanding of the nature of what passes for truth. He saw it as a *self-made reality* for those who would shape it for their own ends. In other words, there is no "pure" truth. Volf elaborates on how Foucault helped reshape postmodern thinking about the nature of truth.

Foucault, however, wants to say more than simply, 'strategies of power are immanent in (the) will to knowledge' . . . much more. What seems to bother him is not just the immodesty of all claims to possess pure truth nor simply the multiple forms of 'rationalities of terror,' . . . but the traditional notion of truth itself. Truth, he claims, is produced, constructed, imposed; true is what *passes for true*. Notice one extremely unfortunate consequence of such a view. . . . All cultural systems must then be equally true, and (apparently) all truth-claims equally valid – the truth claims of the victims and the truths of the perpetrators (Volf 1996: 248).

Thus, according to postmodernism, all texts represent the will to power of their authors. If so, however, it then becomes necessary for readers to assume that this is so and approach every

text with suspicion. However, one then wonders if it occurs to postmodernists that others might just as well use the hermeneutic of suspicion on *their* texts. The reader might ask what “will to power” causes *them* to devise strategies that attempt to overturn the epistemological foundations that have stood in Western civilization for centuries? Why should the reader trust their judgments more than say, those of modern or Christian writers? In this sense the attempt to invalidate credibility in texts is self-defeating.

The course taken by postmodernists that texts lack credibility as disinterested or pure discourse, a position they think justified because they suspect that all texts conceal ulterior motives for power and self-aggrandizement, seems extreme to others. For one thing, it tends toward anarchy, “not a nihilistic destruction of all authority, but a belief in a *plurality of authorities*” (Vanhoozer 1998: 139, italics added). But since the author, we are told, has such motives, his writings cannot therefore have credible authority or integrity. Thus, he is consigned to either oblivion or to death so that he may never be heard from again. Otherwise, he would confuse or frustrate readers who, according to postmodern literary theorists, deserve the right to draw *their own* conclusions and thus make their own judgements *without interference* from the totalizing concepts of the author. Therefore, incredulity in reading is not enough, “the author must die so that the interpreter might live” (Vanhoozer 1998: 139). A plurality of authorities, on the other hand, such as that comprised of a multiplied number of individual readers, is not seen by postmodernists as posing a threat to the freedom of anyone. As an aside, this also defines the disagreement between orthodox Christians and postmodern Christians, the former being content with the authority of the Bible (and its authors), the latter preferring the authority of the individuals who read Scripture.

Not only is incredulity toward texts the right way to read them, according to radical postmodern critics, but it is a matter of ethical integrity to do so. There is a “new morality of

knowledge” in many circles today. The moral reader is the one who “refuses to believe in fixed meanings and final solutions.” One is therefore unethical if one finds credibility in the text. “If the structure and determination of the text (and the world) are imposed rather than discovered by language, *then the moral stance toward knowledge is to suspend belief indefinitely*” (Vanhoozer 1998: 183). Thus we arrive at the opposite epistemological stance of Augustine: “One must *disbelieve* in order to withstand.”

Incredulity toward texts is apparently best served by the author’s absence since he or she is not present to protest the interpretation of the reader. However, incredulity toward the text is another matter. It *is* present and will remain so unless banned or burned. What shall be done, then, about the text and its “imposed” reality? The answer, according to postmodernists, is that the reader must learn how to play off semiotics against semantics (Lakeland 1997: 126). This is because, in the view of postmodern literary critics, the signs of semiotics have no inherent relationship to the semantical relationships within sentences. That is, the words of any language are interchangeable. Their use is arbitrary and completely dependent on their place in the “total language system, i.e., in [their _{NLM}] *structural* position” (Carson 1996: 72-73).

This distinction between signs and the signified is also one of the aims of deconstructionism. But Derrida goes further. He assumes that the text is also deconstructing itself (1997: 9-10) and thus communicating something other than its apparent or surface meaning. Therefore, there must first be a taking apart of the text so that the reader can discover what the text is *failing* to communicate. In an interview at Villanova University in October of 1994, Derrida stated that deconstruction “is an analysis which tries to find out how their thinking [that of the authors of particular texts _{NLM}] works or does not work, to find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneity within their own corpus . . .” (1997: 52-53). For Derrida, therefore, reading texts is an exercise in constant *re-inventions*: “It is something which can be totally new every moment”

(1997: 21). The reader, accordingly, is told that he or she must supply the context for meaning because none resides in the mere signs or ideas themselves. Instead, what the signs signify is indeterminate and a barrier to meaning. In deconstructing a text, and *reconstructing what it should have said*, therefore, the reader may eventually arrive at any number of meanings any of which or none of which may have significance for him or her.

Without the reader's incredulity towards texts, the postmodernist insists, there can be no strategy by which one may arrive at meaning in the text. The strategy is that one must be suspicious of all texts. This is because what is revealed in the text is always accompanied by "what remains concealed." Postmodern readers, therefore, are linguistic cynics. It is expected of them that they will be suspicious of the content of textual sources and utterances. This is because there are 'gaps' in the texts between the "known and unknown" which necessitate that the reader "contribute to the meaning of the text" (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 218). Put another way, the reader begins with the assumption that meaning is impossible unless he or she supplies it because the text has been corrupted both by the "will to power" of the author and the indeterminacy of language. "What is clear in all this is that the focus of interpretation has shifted from the author to the text to the reader" (Carson 1996: 77).

Some postmodernists go beyond the indictment that texts are not credible and charge them, especially the Bible, with fostering an agenda of outright oppression. They believe that such texts actually provoke unrest and spiritual confusion. Therefore,

Biblical ideological critics aim at demystifying the 'religious' of the Bible and relocating the Bible as a site of and a tool in ideological conflict. They reveal the ideological cracks that have been plastered over with the facade of ideologically suspect spirituality; they uncover and stress the texts that may be useful in countering oppressive structures; and they attack the pervasive ideological bias of the discipline of biblical studies (Adam 1995: 50-51).

Therefore, as the postmodernists would have it, the “real” world is a fabrication of the power interests of the West. Reality is no more. In its place we find social or historical fictions.

2.3. From Realism to Social Fictions

There has been a major ideological shift in Western culture and tradition as to what constitutes reality. Accordingly, many have come to the conviction that the sure and certain claims of modernity are “nothing more than historically conditioned conventions . . . of no more intrinsic worth than the conventions of non-Western or premodern cultures. . . .” (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 29). Put another way, when the tenets of postmodernism take hold in the collective consciousness of a community people are no longer certain of what is real. Though Eastern religions have long blurred the distinction between the real and the fanciful, this is a new development for Western culture. At least Kant had allowed for reality in his philosophy. He insisted, however, that while the real (the noumenal, “the-thing-in-itself”) was present, it was unknowable (Kant 1990: 158, 165-167). With postmodern literary critics, though, we have moved well beyond that. According to them, there is no reality at all, only appearances (Milbank, Pickstock, and Ward 1999: 32).

But what is “real?” When philosophers and literary critics deny reality do they mean that there are no real objects in the world such as trees, rocks, and water? Or are they saying, instead, that objects in-themselves are simply no more than collections of atoms, arranged into shapes or patterns by chance, that human beings have categorized through mental images? Hasker provides an answer:

Often this analysis of real things into their constituents is carried on in scientific terms, but a metaphysician may want to ask whether the constituents identified by science are the ‘ultimate reals,’ or whether they can themselves be analyzed in terms of something still more basic. . . [something that is NLM] ‘ultimately real.’ Thus when a

philosopher says that physical objects don't exist, he probably doesn't mean to say that there are no such things as trees, tables, and baseball bats. It's much more likely that what he means is that the 'ultimate constituents' of such objects, what they really consist of, is something very much different from physical objects as we ordinarily think of them. Perhaps trees and ball bats are ultimately made up of mental images, thoughts in people's minds. . . . Any other answer would distort the truth by failing to capture the indissoluble unity of the Real (or, as some would say, of the Absolute) . . .

(1983: 14-15).

Western civilization, from its beginning, had been founded on such assumptions of reality. Those assumptions became the basis for building a worldview, a perspective on "how that reality is arranged, what is ultimate, and what is humanity's and the individual's place in it" (Beckwith and Parrish 1997: 147). Moreover, their assumptions included laws, the findings of science, ethical systems of right and wrong (old fashioned virtues), and mathematical laws and principles. Now, with the coming of postmodernity

it appears to people everywhere that 'reality isn't what it used to be.' The old epistemology that equated human beliefs with cosmic reality is now a minority report. Ancient and not-so-ancient systems of eternal truth lie in ruins everywhere around us. The mainstream of social reality has shifted (Anderson 1990: xxi).

The shift from realism to the "fictions" of postmodernism did not occur in a vacuum. A number of other forces had already been at work in the culture including the philosophies of Hume and Kant, the art of the impressionists, and the ascendancy of naturalism over supernaturalism. But the greatest force for the shift occurred when postmodern literary theory found its way, as it has, into the mainstream of Western cultural life. The result has been a blurring of the boundaries between the real and the non-real. Adam points out that "Where deconstructive insights flourish, the boundary between history and fiction — already hard to

pinpoint – will become less clear” (1995: 33-34).

Keith Windschuttle calls this blurring of the lines between history and fiction “the killing of history.” He writes that in the last decade of the twentieth century,

... the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us. The central point upon which history was founded no longer holds: *there is no fundamental distinction between history and myth*. This view is not itself new. It was forcefully argued more than one hundred years ago by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and has been nurtured by his followers ever since (1996: 2, italics added).

The removal of the distinction between history and myth really means that there are no longer such things as historical “facts.” As Gertrude Stein humorously said, “There is no there *there*” (Balmer 1996: Preface, unnumbered page, italics added). The only “reality” in the work of many postmodern historians is not what they discover but what they create (Phillips in Dockery 1995: 256). A preconceived notion of “fairness” has caused some postmodern historians to write history the way “it ought to be” in order to address what they perceive as inequities between the interests of the powerful and those of the weak. For instance, the hermeneutics of suspicion is also operative in historical studies:

... this suspicion is bolstered by the growing awareness of the violence inflicted by the modern West over the past five centuries, not only on colonized and marginalized peoples, including women, but also, increasingly, on the earth itself. . . . Both epistemologically (in terms of what we can know) and morally (in terms of what is right), ‘reality isn’t what it used to be’ (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 29).

In the process of the passing of time, Western civilization has witnessed great changes in belief systems, changes that completely reverse former assumptions. We have witnessed that change in the postmodern understanding of history. For instance, one of the ways to see the shift from reality in history to fiction is the comparison of an earlier work with a later edition. I am indebted to Carson for calling my attention to an example of that in Mortimer J. Adler's helpful work *How to Read a Book* (originally published in 1927). According to Carson, Adler devoted a specific section in that book to how one should read history. Adler insisted that in dealing with historical works one must compare historian with historian "to discover the interpretation a writer places on the *facts . . .*" (Carson 1996: 25). Adler used the term "facts" because in that period of time historians believed that they were dealing with objective truth thus giving their historical data real and not imagined significance. But in examining the new edition of Adler's book, jointly written with Charles Van Doren, we find what Carson calls a "really shocking change" (1996: 25). Now "facts" have given way to "fictions." "A historical fact, though we may have a feeling of trust and solidity about the word, is one of the most *elusive* things in the world. . . . We class history, the story of the past, more often under *fiction* than under science — if it must be affiliated with one or the other" (Adler and Van Doren 1972: 236-237, italics added).

Reader Response theory in literary criticism is another way for some to create a whole new world of interpretation, one in which realism gives way to pretense. The way this is accomplished is through "counter reading," that is, reading *against* the text. For example, some feminists are counter readers. They are non-realists, that is, they do not regard the texts of Western civilization as representative of the real world but as fictions created for the purpose of keeping males in power. They include the Bible since it too was written by males. Therefore, they insist that they will not be "indoctrinated" or dominated by any literature that preserves what they call patriarchal values. In a similar vein, some feminists also take issue with the biblical notion that the cross of

Jesus is part of God's plan for the redemption of humanity. For example, Joanne Brown and Carole Bohn maintain in their book *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* (1989) that they do not believe that God's love for the world is expressed through the sacrifice of Christ, his suffering or his death. This kind of radical feminist approach to Scripture suggests that liberation for the oppressed cannot occur without a new approach to theology. This is because

Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Is it any wonder that there is much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of culture is of 'divine child abuse' — God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the atonement, this idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. This bloodthirsty God is the God of the patriarchy who at the moment controls the whole Judeo-Christian tradition . . . We do not need to be saved by Jesus' death from some original sin. [instead NLM] We need to be liberated from the oppression of racism, classism, and sexism, that is, from patriarchy (Brown and Bohn 1989: 26-27).

Such a reading of the Atonement, of course, is completely unacceptable to Christians who believe that the revelation of Christ's suffering on the cross on behalf of sinners is the only adequate way for persons to receive God's acceptance and redemption. It is the historical reality of suffering by the Savior for his people which serves as the basis for God's saving act in Jesus Christ. Moreover, there is a "fellowship of his sufferings," that is, a communion of the saints of all ages in the sufferings of Christ that has teleological fulfillment in the resurrection of their bodies at the end of history (Philippians 3: 10-11). The point here is that the counter reading of those who are radical feminists has reversed that. In the light of Brown's and Bohn's statement above, it is clear that at least some feminists have *radically reinterpreted* the atoning work of

Christ. While they do not deny the historical reality of the death of Jesus on the cross, they have restated it as an pattern of “divine child abuse” thus rendering the significance of the cross as nothing more than an example of dehumanizing theology, a patriarchal fiction from which humanity must be delivered. However, they do this not so much through reading-against-the-text (though that is present) but by reading *into* the text the bias of feminism. In other words, we have in the most radical form of feminism a reading of *resistance* which uses a sociological bias (in this case, radical feminism) to maintain that the atonement of the cross is an example not of a *revealed* faith but of the “*constructs*” of the patriarchal period in history. These views of radical feminism, then, provide one of the clearest demonstrations of the wide gulf that exists between the normative Christian worldview and that of the most radical forms of postmodernism.

Postmodernism’s virtual identification of fact and fiction apparently originates with the writings of Derrida. His famous maxim — “There is nothing outside the text” — means that there is no non-metaphorical way of speaking about the world. Therefore, while the world is “there” we cannot really know it because language can do no more than describe it “sideways,” as it were. There can therefore be no objective human perspective on reality. Accordingly, language, which due to its metaphorical structure is “contaminated,” is unable to describe what passes for being real. Therefore, Derrida’s understanding that there is no non-metaphorical way of speaking of the world appears to reduce our knowledge of reality to the inventions or “fictions” of the human mind. However, according to the radical theorists, *even* these inventions are deceptive (“mute artifices for the senses”) and therefore distorted renderings of what is deemed reality. This is because it is left to the human mind to interpret the images of the world that come into it through the senses but the interpretation thereof cannot be pure because language itself is impure.

According to a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy, good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad

writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one. Metaphoricity [interpretation through comparison^{NLM}] is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic . . . (Derrida 1981: 149).

Thus, according to Derrida, there can be no pure interpretation because language corrupts logic. One can only keep at the task of reading as an opportunity of “playing” language games over and over again in vain attempts at arriving at some personally creative meaning of texts such as those of Augustine’s whose writings continually fascinate him (Derrida 1997: 20-21). Vanhoozer explains why this has turned many toward a sense of futility in reading.

. . . From the premise that all language and thought is metaphorical, Derrida concludes that all interpretation should be metaphorical— creative, marked by free association, irreducible to literal paraphrase, equivocal. Clearly, if interpretation is metaphorical, it is difficult to speak of determinate meaning. . . . Therefore we must acknowledge our philosophies and religions as ‘fictions,’ not meaning that they are not ‘true’ but rather that they are *our* creations as humans (1998: 131).

If one asks what has created the shift from realism to fiction one is brought back once again to the ways in which language was originally used as a means of describing objective reality and the way it was used later, under the aegis of postmodern literary theory, as the source of indeterminacy and instability. However, even before postmodernism had become prominent in culture, some observers had determined that language was basically a system of cognition rather than a reflection of the objective world. They distinguished between the premodern use of language as “describers of the things they represent” with the modern views of language which they believed were informed by the work of anthropologists. Language thus became a “tool with which a culture creates its reality” (Weaver 1948: 58).

Carson calls all this “a hermeneutical morass” (1996: 93-137). Thus, since reality is not

discernible through the senses, we are left instead with metaphorical “fictions” posing as models of historicity. The result is that postmodern humans have learned that they have nothing substantial remaining in which to place their confidence. For this reason, if for no other, it is clear to many, among them Christians, that much has been lost with the ascendancy of postmodern thinking in the world. The way out of the morass, then, is to understand first how we became mired in it and then to use some of its own tools, particularly its hermeneutic of suspicion, to reassert the epistemological basis for a Christian worldview. We can do so by turning the method on postmodernism itself, that is, by looking at the “will to power” that is concealed behind *their* texts and then use that discovery, where possible, to fashion strategies designed to overcome postmodernism’s hold over the culture. It may be that this present work can make some small contribution to that end.

There is a “spontaneous human attitude” that there is something beyond what we can see and experience that has always been a part of human experience. This suggests that

the solidity of things derives from an eternal permanence. Otherwise, . . . if we take things as only finite, their solidity paradoxically vanishes. Equally, certain apparently real properties of things, like colors, being not fully comprehensible by reason, will tend to vanish also. Hence there is a spontaneous trust involved in perception that is indeed a kind of faith, even an implicit faith in God (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999: 26).

The reestablishment of the Christian worldview, then, is not simply a desirable goal but a necessary one if we are to escape the hermeneutical morass. Other alternatives may be available as well. But before we attempt to examine them, it would be helpful to consider some of the effects of postmodern thinking on the institutions of the West.

waned. Instead, they came to believe that the values of modernity, far from being neutral in their objectives for the culture, as they had supposed, were actually being used as tools of sociological manipulation. In this new intellectual environment many scholars had come to the position that modernity and before it, Christianity, was a Euro-centric vision of reality, a vision fostered by Western values to the exclusion of the interests of marginalized people groups in the rest of the world. The result was a split between the worldview of the West with its myth of scientific progress (the benefits of which seemed mostly to accrue to white European males) and the world of the disenfranchised. Moreover, it seemed to university leaders that continued commitment to modernity would only result in a widening of the gap between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, the “haves” and the “have-nots” (Veith 1994: 151).

Thus, the universities began to reconfigure social reality in an age in which it became increasingly clear to many that there were no absolute truths to guide the culture. Instead, only the values of particular communities remained. The requirements for culture building through education, therefore, demanded new approaches, one of which has been called “political correctness,” an aggressive quasi-ethical approach by educational theorists to reconstruct society along lines that would fit the new epistemological position of the postmodern age. Anderson calls this approach to building global community through reconstruction an example of SCR, the “social construction of reality” and indicates that this is one of the emerging inventions of postmodernity. He insists, however, that one must be willing to “step away” from the social reconstruction and see it for what it is, “a fiction,” which in his estimation is also an illusion (1990: 251-260).

What remains in education, however, that is not an illusion is secularism, along with the dominant worldview of naturalism that has promoted it on educational campuses for most of the last two centuries (Marsden 1994: 3, 5). Secularism may actually have paved the way for postmodernism in that it created at least the impression of disinterest in matters of transcendental

truth. Accordingly, the universities have been involved in “an intellectual defense of secular culture” (Wilkes 1981: 12). Secularism, though it is the antithesis of the Christian worldview, fits well with the principles of modernity, particularly those that relate to empiricism and the scientific progress of the West. That scientific legacy has been the wonder of the world. But the euphoria engendered in the West because of the wonders of scientific progress was not to last. The tide toward postmodernism had already begun to turn. Two world wars, the development of nuclear weapons of terror, and the Jewish holocaust of Nazi Germany, were only a few of the developments that demolished the once easy confidence that had characterized the modern period of history. Therefore, the Enlightenment vision of inevitable progress, which is a hallmark of modernity, is not likely to be accepted in most of the universities in a postmodernist environment.

The coming of postmodernism, then, offered a new vision of relating to the culture. Adherents to that understanding began to believe that modernity was a totalizing institutional mentality that had effectively ruled out the interests of those who were marginalized in order to enhance the growing power of white European males. Postmodernists also have come to believe that the leaders of Western civilization, being guilty of the misuse of such power, should be exposed as villains and oppressors (e.g. Christopher Columbus, the Christian Church in sending out missionaries, and international capitalists, among others). Accordingly, those committed to the new way began a systematic dismantling of the prerogatives of modernity, a process that continues until the present day. For instance, while universities had once been interested in discovering truth, they became increasingly convinced that such truth had been defined by the white European male power structure as a means of advancing their own interests to the exclusion of others. Therefore, this “truth” they now considered to be fiction. Thus, they were determined to induce a shift of power from the wealthy to the poor, from the franchised to the disenfranchised, from the powerful to the weak. To accomplish this, they chose to challenge the

very epistemological principle of objective truth based on universal reason that had served as the foundation for Western civilization. Such truth, they were convinced, was being used as an unjust tool for the manipulation of the dispossessed. "Today's universities, while ostensibly devoted to cultivating truth, now argue that truth [in the objective sense NLM] does not exist. This does not mean that the universities are closing their doors. Rather, the universities are redefining what scholarship is all about" (Veith 1994: 50).

That redefinition is still going on though the concept of postmodernism remains a conundrum to many. In fact, it appears to be so open ended as a theory that its definition is still being determined. Crouch explains:

Postmodernism seems to mean anything, everything, and nothing. It's today's academic Rorschach blot on which nervous modernists and others project all their fantasies, both benign and terrifying. Whatever they are most afraid of, that's what postmodernism is. On the other hand, whatever they most secretly desire, postmodernism promises. So postmodernism is not one thing. *Postmodernism* originally referred to specific movements in art and architecture, which reacted to a specific movement called modernism, which happened quite a while ago. Postmodernism itself is no longer as central an issue in art and architecture, and the word has been applied in a number of new ways. For some, *postmodernism* refers to a renewed attention to 'the other,' 'the marginalized.' . . . Second, this attention to the marginalized has led many postmodernists into a profound skepticism toward modernity's assumptions about knowledge, truth, and reason. These postmoderns question the extent to which modernity's attempts to make truth claims is valid. They've discovered that at the base of almost every truth claim is a story, a story that privileges certain groups and marginalizes others. . . . In a way, postmodernism is relativist. But it's not relativist across the board, because it actually has a certain perspective, the perspective of the truth claims of the marginalized, who are given

quite a lot of validity in the postmodern epistemological scheme. Third, *postmodernism* is also used to refer loosely to advanced consumer capitalism, in which the prevalence of choice has rendered everything level. . . Everything is relativized in this setting — not so much the claims of the marginalized or even a rigorous epistemological process but by your ability to choose anything. Everything is open to you as a consumer (2000: 76).

Still, Stanley Grenz captures the essence of postmodernism by focusing on its singular devotion to community. “Postmodernism affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate . . . There is no absolute truth; rather truth is relative . . .” (1996: 8). It can readily be understood, if Grenz’s evaluation is valid, that postmodernism is a much different way of looking at the world than the older way of modernity. Truth, rather than being conceived as univocal in essence, becomes fragmented, the partisan figments of multiplied separate communities. It is easy to see that such a view of truth makes the coalescence of power for achieving broader cultural objectives unlikely. But there are other ways of distinguishing modernity from postmodernity. Carson offers his analysis:

Of the many distinctions that have been attempted between modernism and postmodernism, perhaps this is the most common: modernism still believed in the objectivity of knowledge, and that the human mind can uncover such knowledge. In its most optimistic form, modernism held that ultimately knowledge would revolutionize the world, squeeze God to the periphery or perhaps abandon him to his own devices, and build an edifice of glorious knowledge to the great God Science. But this stance has largely been abandoned in the postmodernism that characterizes most Western universities (1996: 21).

To accomplish the change in epistemology from the age-long search for universal truth to the creation of the new paradigms for knowledge that were emerging, university leaders needed

an effective tool. This was afforded them by radical postmodern literary theory with its particular emphasis on the deconstructionism of Derrida. This technique of the critical reading of the great literature of the West, including the Bible (though, ironically, it came out of the East), has now become the *modus operandi* of many intellectuals in academia.

Deconstructionists hold that language and meaning are *socially* constructed which is to say, in effect, that connotation overrules denotation. The meaning of language is therefore determined by community etymologies and these are constantly changing as socio-cultural conditions change. There is therefore no universal meaning for language. This is an important distinction, one that has created a revolution in the thinking of postmodern academics. The outcome for academics is that it provides them with freedom from the former restraints of objectivism. This, when coupled with their desire to refashion the Western world into one altogether different than that which existed formerly, has created a dynamic for postmodern change in the universities. The new technique of Derrida also gives academy interpreters a way to lay hold of the documents of Western civilization in order to “take bits and pieces of the text out of the frameworks in which they are apparently embedded (‘deconstruct the text’), and refit them into the framework (‘locatedness’) of the interpreter, thereby generating fresh insight, not least that which relativizes and criticizes the text itself” (Carson 1996: 21-22).

But deconstruction is not an end in itself. It is an end toward the means of *reconstructing* a new world, a world that respects pluralism, diversity, and multiculturalism above what some have labeled as parochialism, provincialism, and absolutism. This reconstruction, as I have indicated, is now going on in universities under the rubric of political correctness. As the term suggests there is a *correct* way to relate to culture. The “political” part is the judicious use of power by academics as a means of ensuring that the postmodern vision of correctness is the rule on the campus and thus ultimately, as students take their places in the structure of society, in the culture itself. Carson explains what is behind this vision of creating a new society:

Postmoderns often assert that the world has most recently been dominated by the worldview (meta-narrative) of Western progress. This meta-narrative has shaped our social agenda so that 'marginalized' groups must either conform (become homogenous) or else be repressed and possibly face violent extinction. This has happened repeatedly (Marxist-Leninism, the Crusades, Nazism, etc.). Thus postmodernism also has a social agenda: the aim of education is not the search for truth but the *transformation* of education society. Postmodernism is easily identified with multiculturalism and does not hesitate to 'reconstruct' history (1996: 37, italics added).

So universities no longer are considered to be merely the repositories and purveyors of the accumulated wisdom of the West as some have assumed. Now they are reconstructors of a new society, some would even say, the society that *should have been*. However, it would be unlikely that this would be the case unless educators had been able to shift the focus of education from the classical hermeneutics of modernity (the *discovery* of the meaning of texts) to the radical hermeneutics of postmodernity (the *invention* or *creation* of meaning by interpretative communities). In turn, this shift in hermeneutical method has enabled scholars to see that whatever passes for truth in the culture essentially comes down to someone's or some group's interpretation. On this basis, one's personal reality is predicated on one's interpretation and a community's reality is shaped by the interpretation of its constituents. To change the interpretation is to change the reality. For example, Foucault taught that the author was nothing more than the projection of the reader's way of interpreting texts (1994: 286-289; See also Vanhoozer 1998: 238). This means that the singularity of an author's meaning, say that which is expressed in a nation's constitution, or that which is found in the believer's Bible, need not determine anyone else's agenda except those who wish to be loyal to *their own* interpretations. The rest of a nation or a tribe could go in as many directions as their interpretations would lead them for, in postmodernist thinking, there is no *determinate* meaning for any text.

Can we justify our belief that there is a determinate meaning in the text, that texts are about something *other* than themselves? Can Christians justify their belief that what the Bible is about is the knowledge of God? Most readers feel no need to justify their belief in determinate meaning. They hold a common sense view that simply assumes that texts express the thoughts — about the world, or human nature — of their authors. [The postmodernist NLM] claims that the ‘obvious’ meaning is not discovered but invented by the interpreter. What is undone is the authority of common sense itself. . . . Do interpreters ever find, or is it fabrication all the way down? (Vanhoozer 1998: 286).

Vanhoozer helps us see how we have arrived at political correctness on university campuses. My preferred term for this way of thinking is *societal reconstruction*, a more correct term, I am convinced, for what is actually going on in the postmodern culture. However, it is the push for political correctness that makes such reconstruction possible as university leaders pursue their common agenda for societal change. Once educators had decided that the tomes of Western civilization were nothing more than the peculiar interpretations of the ruling classes it became an easy next step to substitute the interpretations of postmodern readers in place of the earlier ones. *It is this that has driven the massive curriculum changes now taking place in contemporary universities.* This new set of interpretative assumptions then became the vantage point for viewing everything else in the culture and the agenda for shaping a new societal vision. This has now become a common conviction of educators everywhere in Western civilization. “The facts are facts by virtue of *institutional agreement*” (Vanhoozer 1998: 169, italics added).

Because of this change in institutional vision some radical things are now happening in academia. An example is the Rigoberta Menchu matter. Ms. Menchu is a recent Nobel Prize winner. She received the award in 1992 for her socialist activism in Guatemala. Her autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchu, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, was published in 1984 and it has become a staple of the curriculum on multiculturalism in America’s institutions of

higher education. There follows the way that Ms. Menchu begins her book:

My name is Rigoberta Menchu. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people (Menchu 1984: 1).

Menchu's book describes the torture and destruction of the poor in Guatemala (Menchu 1984: 172-187). She also tells the story of her own suffering and that of her family members at the hands of rich landowners and right-wing death squads (1984: 236-247). Much of what she writes about oppression in Guatemala is not disputed nor is it held against her by most that she writes as one who is in full sympathy with the goals of Marxist ideology. Up to this point, then, there is nothing particularly unusual about her story. It is a description of the kind of injustice that is common fare in articles and books all over the world. But, so graphic in description is Menchu's story that it is just the sort of work that postmodern educators would feature since it serves their agenda for providing examples of the plight of marginalized peoples who suffer under colonial oppression. It therefore represents an effective way of advancing the institutional objective of bringing such things to the center of the educational process and, accordingly, to the attention of the public.

Universities, anxious to be 'more inclusive' of women, minorities, and 'marginalized cultures,' have kicked out dead white European males to make room for her book on required reading lists. It has joined the canon, raising student's consciousness and heightening their sensitivity about the plight of women and indigenous people at the hands of American-backed neocolonialist capitalism (Veith 1999: 25).

Much of Veith's journalistic report highlights the commitment of universities to cultural relevancy and their commendable and praiseworthy effort to address the social concerns of the disenfranchised. Certainly such is not uncharacteristic of legitimate academic interest. But what follows is. What Ms. Menchu writes in her Nobel Prize winning book makes a good story but it is now clear that much of what she writes never took place. Veith explains:

David Stoll, a Stanford graduate student in anthropology, was working on his dissertation in Guatemala when he passed the site where Ms. Menchu's brother was supposedly tortured and burned to death. He mentioned it to a villager, who told him that no one had ever been burned to death there. . . her father was not an oppressed poverty-stricken peasant . . . she [Ms. Menchu NLM] was not an illiterate child denied the opportunity to go to school because she was female; she went to an elite Catholic boarding school. . . the key struggle in her book, between her father and the light skinned landowner, turned out to be an argument between her father and his in-laws. And far from seeing the Marxist guerillas as liberators, the villagers were actually terrified of them (1999: 25).

In short, Ms. Menchu *invented* the story of her having suffered at the hands of rich land owners. Moreover, she was not a peasant but was herself the child of a landowner. Neither was she an illiterate child as she claimed (Stoll 1999: 159). Mr. Stoll later returned to the United States and wrote a book exposing the fraudulent nature of Ms. Menchu's work. His book is entitled: *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1999).

When I began visiting northern Quiche in 1987, to interview peasants about the violence and reconstruction, I had no reason to doubt the veracity of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. Nor did anyone else as far as I knew. . . . I recall being surprised when a routine atrocity check, described at the start of this chapter, failed to corroborate the immolation of her brother and other captives in the Chajul plaza. . . . Only after becoming very familiar with what peasants had to say did I realize that their testimony

was not backing up Rigoberta's . . . Unlike *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, which describes the [Marxist_{NLM}] guerrillas as liberation fighters, my Ixil [Maya_{NLM}] sources tended to lump soldiers (Guatemalan government_{NLM}) and guerillas together as threats to their lives. Instead of being popular heroes, the guerillas were, like soldiers, people with guns who brought suffering in their wake (Stoll 1999: 8).

It is at this point that we arrive at a significant place for understanding the more extreme consequences of postmodern fallout in America's institutions of higher education. At one time most Western universities would probably have quickly removed Menchu's book from their recommended reading lists and called for the Nobel Prize which had been awarded her be withdrawn. However, this is not what has happened. Instead, *the person who revealed the truth* about Ms. Menchu's fabrications, Mr. Stoll, has been castigated by some in the academic community for even bringing the matter to their attention. This is the case even though his findings have since been confirmed by an investigative reporter for the New York Times (Veith 1999: 25).

Meanwhile, though the academy and the media are now generally aware of the extensive fabrications in Ms. Menchu's autobiography they have yet to call her publicly to account for her rhetorical inventions perhaps preferring the politically correct value of her work more *in this case* than the integrity of academic standards. Put another way, since there is indeed a long record of abuse in Guatemala against the disenfranchised, including women, powerful interests in academia have decided that the world is served well by Menchu's story of social injustice no matter how fanciful much of it is. We have, therefore, in this situation an example of how the practice of Reader Response hermeneutics sometimes works effectively for the agenda of universities in a postmodern environment. In this case, the interpreters are postmodern academic leaders who, in the main, have apparently concluded that Ms. Menchu's book fulfills a need for the world to learn of the abuses in Guatemala whether or not her particular account of her own

involvement in the widespread oppression of that country is true. After all, it should be remembered that the author is irrelevant in the New Hermeneutic. Veith tells of one academic who seems to speak for others in the academic community in this regard. He writes:

‘Whether her book is true or not, I don’t care,’ says Wellesley Agosin, quoted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. ‘We should teach our students about the brutality of the Guatemalan military and the U. S. financing of it.’ . . . Other academics are using the multicultural defense: Ms. Menchu’s *culture* does not follow the Western standards of objective truth-telling. Her book is a Mayan narrative, similar to a myth or legend, designed to express *the truths of a community*. To impose our views of truth on her expression of communal solidarity is another act of Western ethnocentrism (1999: 25, italics added).

The Menchu matter is, by most measures of academic propriety, even in a postmodern age, quite unusual. Until this date, however, few academics have raised any serious objection to its handling by university leaders. Moreover, while it seems strange that matters would come to this point in Western institutions, this only highlights the need for a critique of postmodern ideas such as that represented by this present work. While I have elsewhere called attention to the strengths of postmodern thought, then, I also wish to point out what happens when, for the sake of pursuing a politically correct agenda, extreme postmodern ideas go unchallenged. Mr. Veith submits his summary of this special case and it is significant. “To cast doubt on an academic icon is indeed sacrilegious. The religion that it violates is postmodernism. According to its dogmas, truth is not objective, but something we construct according to our political or personal agendas” (Veith 1999: 26).

Richard Rorty’s postmodern philosophy fits Veith’s analysis well because it rejects *any* notion of truth as objective reality. For Rorty truth is no more than mind or language mirroring nature and the “search for truth” is in vain (1979: 393). Following Quine’s holism he wishes to

“weave together . . . the beliefs of other cultures with the beliefs we already have” (Rorty 1991: 38). Rorty seems not at all bothered by the tag placed on postmodernists that they are relativists. This is because he professes to see no other viable position that one may hold given the demise of notions of “objective truth.” Accordingly, the “truths of a community” which were put forth by the universities as a defense for Ms. Menchu’s “Mayan myth” are understandable as long as one accepts the notion that all “truth” is a construct of the mind. Rorty therefore finds it impossible to rise above community notions of agreement. Thus, he writes:

We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence — mere agreement — to something like ‘correspondence with reality as it is in itself.’ One reason why dropping this latter notion strikes many people as ‘relativistic’ is that it denies the necessity that inquiry should someday converge to a single point — that Truth is ‘out there,’ up in front of us, waiting for us to reach it. This latter image seems to us pragmatists an unfortunate attempt to carry a religious view of the world over into an increasingly secular culture. All that is worth preserving of the claim that rational inquiry will converge to a single point is the claim that we must be able to explain why false views were held in the past, and thus go about reeducating our benighted ancestors (Rorty 1991: 38).

Universities are therefore now constructing their own realities through political correctness reeducating the “benighted” both ancient and contemporary. It is thus well and good that they explain to the public what they are doing. Using the postmodern literary technique of deconstructionism and the Reader Response hermeneutic, they are reconstructing society along the lines that fit their postmodern vision. The Menchu matter is apparently considered by postmoderns to be a graphic way of demonstrating the broad outline of that vision.

It is important to understand, then, that universities, in the main, are not passive in their commitment to the principles of postmodernism. Instead, they are aggressively pursuing their agenda and determined that the cultural vision they espouse will eventually become the vision of

Western civilization as well. The term they use for this aggressive approach is “advocacy scholarship.” “Political correctness” is the popular term. It is a renunciation of objectivity and reason in favor of interpretational models of the way things *ought* to be. For purposes of this work with its emphasis on literary criticism, political correctness is to be understood as an attempt to deconstruct cultural reality. It is no longer the search for truth that occupies the agenda of educators as it did throughout most of the modern period, rather, political correctness is the academy’s attempt to *transform* society (to reconstruct it) through education. Thus *all* texts are now read differently. They are not read simply to discover truth (*mimesis*) but, when considered necessary, to create (*poiesis*) it (See Phillips in Dockery 1995: 255).

Scholastic endeavors, then, except in the sciences (and even here there are signs of postmodern influence), are no longer driven by a passion for discovering truth as they once were (Buttrick 1960: 54). Postmodern literary theory has taught them that the “truth” they were discovering in the modern period was neither relevant nor desirable for the culture. Using the literary device of the hermeneutic of suspicion they were not content to have demystified the ulterior motives of the “ruling classes” but they have begun to rewrite the story of Western civilization. For instance, some historians have now villainized Christopher Columbus and are claiming that the discovery of the new world was actually an act of oppression rather than simply an exploration of virgin territory for purposes of economic and colonial development. They label Eurocentric scholarship and journals as attempts to subjugate minorities and they have moved into the major universities to rewrite history and curriculums to suit the new objectives of satisfying feminist, minority (except Christian), and gay agendas. In some ways, the purpose of scholarship itself has also changed. Many postmodern scholars have now become, to use a term from literary theory, rhetorical manipulators. We can see this especially at work in the scholarship of postmodern historians. “Historians are moving from a modern historicism (the notion that the meaning of events is to be found in their historical context) to a postmodern

'denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus any objective truth about the past' " (Sire 1997: 185).

It is because the method of hermeneutics has shifted from its original focus on the author's intention to a radical fixation on the reader's response that so much of the change in the university is occurring. Reader Response is a swing away from the past literary emphasis on an objective sense of meaning. Such a hermeneutic, of course, does not mean that there is *no meaning* at all. Rather, hermeneutical theory in postmodern circles has shifted the *location* of meaning from the author's intent as expressed in the text to the reader. Therefore:

For the more radical reader-response theorists the text no longer has a fixed meaning.

The 'autonomous text' is repudiated. Rather, the text is open-ended to multiplied meanings because, in the view of postmodernists, the text only comes to meaning in the reader's response to it. Here hermeneutics no longer is a search for the meaning of the text behind the text, but rather a search for the meaning of the text *in front of the text* ... Now the context of the reader is of primary significance (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 218, italics added).

In the light of the comments above, it would not be amiss to suggest that the Reader Response Hermeneutic in postmodern literary criticism might be more accurately termed the sovereignty of the reader over the intention of the author. This does not mean, of course, that the reader is not to respond in some way to a given text for no interpretation can occur without that response. We do indeed attach meaning to texts as we read them. But as used by postmodern literary criticism the reader does not merely respond to the text with an attempt at understanding it, rather, the reader, having deconstructed the text, *reconstructs it* and thereby determines what the text means regardless of the author's intent. This is what the re-constructionists in the universities of America have done with many of the significant texts of Western civilization even though their motives of desiring a more just society are certainly commendable. We turn next to how radical

reader response theory and other aspects of postmodern thinking have affected Christianity.

3.2. Christianity: A Search For Relevance

Gradually, Christians are becoming alarmed by the changes that have been wrought by what is increasingly becoming known as postmodern thought. Some, and this includes quite a number of theologians, have concluded that Christianity is rapidly losing its rightful place as a valid worldview. Allen writes that they are

distressed by the plurality of worldviews. Many have been driven to relativism by the collapse of the Enlightenment's confidence in the power of reason to provide foundations for our truth-claims and to achieve finality in our search for truth in the various disciplines . . . For some time Christianity has been at best a stepchild in our universities and research centers, irrelevant to their inquiries, and explicitly excluded from them in Marxist countries . . . There is such a widespread acquiescence toward pluralism and relativism in the intellectual culture at large that even many church people would be startled by my claim that the ultimate reason to go to church is because Christianity is true (1989: 9).

Allen is clearly an optimist, confident that the Christian church will emerge through these postmodern times stronger than ever. Nevertheless, the influence of postmodernism on Christianity, at this stage of development, while not as pronounced as it is in the world of academia, is strong and growing. There are several indications of this, among them the following: certain aspects of narrative theology; a radical feminism which reads the Bible "against the text" and conducts "Re-imagining Conferences;" the Jesus Seminar, a quest for the historical Jesus, led by John Crossan and Marcus Borg; and some, among them, Nancy Ammerman, even include the moderates who have broken away from the Southern Baptist Convention.

As for the negative influence of certain aspects of narrative theology on Christianity, Mohler thinks that ". . . the most influential postmodern experiment in America is the so-called

'New Yale School.' Foundational to this school is the claim that a new epistemological situation represents a new post-Enlightenment challenge to the Christian truth claim and to our understanding of Scripture and doctrine " (Dockery 1995: 76-77). The literary method that the New Yale School uses is narrative theology. Like all postmodern theory this new narrative method moves away from propositional objective truth to subjectivism and relativism as a means of arriving at what passes for personal or community truth. But narrative theology, at least as a postmodern tool for historical research, also presents an epistemological challenge to the long prevailing method of historical criticism. "Narrative theology . . . is concerned to relate the impressions made by narratives and the insights arising out of them to theological questions, and in particular to give substance to these insights and to suggest criteria by which they, and the stories which prompt them, may be judged true or false" (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 391). By this it is meant that the historicity of narratives is a *different kind of history* than that which has been the assumption of much of historical criticism. Rather, in the context of narrative theology history functions in the biblical story as " 'history-like' (Hans Frei), i.e., that 'it is not a simple reportage of history, but it is also not a fictional story having no contact with history.' . . . [But, NLM] a more radical view would see narrative theology as a departure in the direction of a completely new way of doing theology, leading to a relativizing of religious traditions . . ." (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 391).

In America, as Mohler has indicated, narrative theology emanates from the so called New Yale School of Frei, Kelsey, and Lindbeck. This school posits that literal truth is best understood through narratives, the stories that are so much a feature of both the Old and New Testaments. It is a reaction against what is considered by some to be the more sterile propositional approach to truth which has long characterized Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, for most of its existence, especially since the Enlightenment. But narrative theology shows its affinity with postmodernism in that it also is highly relativistic in choosing to view theology as a "self-

consciously local and particular narrative claim rooted in a specific cultural-linguistic system. Thus, the universal truth claim of Christianity is reduced to a culture-specific system of shared meaning” (Mohler in Dockery 1995: 77). But narrative theology is also against the modern notion that truth is the result of the findings of empirical observation only.

Hans Frei, a narrative theologian at Yale, argued against starting with our experiences and thought patterns as modern persons and then demanding that the biblical stories fit into the modern criteria for truthfulness. Frei believed that the Christian must start with the biblical world, ‘allowing the biblical narratives to define what is real, so that our lives have meaning to the extent that we fit them into that framework.’ The intent is to ‘truthfully’ describe how the world looks from a Christian perspective, however unsystematically it may appear, as the basis for human conversation. . . . This view assumes that the common ground that conversation partners find with each other is more personal and community based than the universal patterns that were assumed to be normative by those in the liberal Enlightenment tradition (Sims in Dockery 1995: 332-333).

Narrative theology, as a postmodern hermeneutical method, may actually therefore serve Christianity as an apologetic for the rich diversity of forms resident in the Scriptures. While this apologetic is available for all Christians, however, Sims offers a caveat for its use by those who represent the evangelical perspective in Christianity. “The primary concern that most evangelicals have with narrative theology is its susceptibility to subjectivist and relativistic interpretations” (Dockery 1995: 334). Knight tells us that Donald Bloesch issues another caution. He makes the observation that the emphasis in narrative theology “‘has shifted from exploring the metaphysical implications of the faith to investigating the story of a people on pilgrimage . . . Theology can ill afford to ignore the issue of truth, for it is truth that gives narrative its significance’” (Knight 1997: 105). Nonetheless, narratives are such a part of the biblical witness

that a revival of its use not only for apologetics but for preaching and evangelism is long overdue. It can be a strong enhancement for the reestablishment of the Christian worldview in this postmodern age. Thus, “a faithful attempt to see the world in the light of the Bible, rather than the other way around, would seem to be a most promising opportunity in a postmodern situation” (Sims in Dockery 1995: 334).

There are signs that much of postmodern ideology has already been distilled in the churches of all denominations and it seems only a matter of time before it has somewhat the same impact on them as it has had in the universities. This is because most of the future ministers and lay leaders are being trained in the universities and divinity schools. We see evidence of this happening even in evangelical churches. For example, a poll taken in the early 1990s in America reveals that 66 percent of Americans believed that ‘there is no such thing as absolute truth.’ The situation in the churches, however, is not much better for the same poll also shows that 53 percent of those “who call themselves evangelical Christians believed that there are no absolutes” (Veith 1994: 16).

What is not being fully appreciated, however, is that postmodernism may prove to be as much a boon as bane for Christianity. Diogenes Allen is one who thinks so. However, along with a growing number of others, he is also cognizant of the positive intellectual contributions that Christianity is making to the new cultural situation. For one thing, the ethics of Christianity (and Judaism as well) is sorely needed by Western culture as a means of counteracting the wrong and even destructive uses of technology. It should also not be forgotten that Christianity has made many contributions to the origins of science and the scientific method. Many, if not most, of the early scientists were devoutly committed to the Christian faith. Some, among them Allen, therefore think that the new intellectual climate created by postmodernism makes it possible for the Christian worldview to return from its cultural exile in the West and gain respect as a viable framework for viewing reality once again. Among other things, Allen insists that “in a postmodern world Christianity is intellectually relevant. It is relevant to the fundamental questions, Why does

the world exist? and Why does it have its present order? It is relevant to the discussion of the foundations of morality and society, especially on the significance of human beings" (Allen 1989: 5-6).

In assessing the impact of a developing postmodernism on Christianity, Allen sees "four broad streams in theology." Each of these is a critique of modern liberal theology. "First is confessional theology, whose primary debt is to Karl Barth's attacks after the First World War on the liberal theology of the nineteenth century. Second is the existentialist-hermeneutical stream, which is primarily indebted to Heidegger, but whose roots go back to Schleiermacher's reflections on hermeneutics. Third, there is a very recent, small, deconstructionist stream, which is indebted to Heidegger and to an extent Jacques Derrida. Fourth, process theology, as derived from A. N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, has recently been characterized as postmodern" (Allen 1989: 6). That "recent, small deconstructionist stream," to which Allen refers and which is a concern of this work, has expanded a great deal, especially in America, since the publication of his book. Allen, who attempts to lead Christians to their "full wealth of conviction," is convinced that the main benefit of postmodernism for Christianity is a wake-up call, not a devastating defeat. The alternative to this, according to Allen, is not retreat but advance. "The way forward is forward." He writes that "the principles of the modern mentality [that are NLM] enshrined in Hume and Kant do not form an impassable barrier which we must either accept or avoid. The actual situation is that the barrier they and others have formed has collapsed. Theologians no longer need to labor within *the tight, asphyxiating little world of the Enlightenment* or to become premodern" (1989: 7, italics added). Allen therefore proposes that Christians use this new situation as an opportunity to build appreciation for the intellectual strength and attractiveness of the Christian faith but this must be done with the "full assurance of conviction in the truth of Christianity" (1989: 8-9).

Perhaps the most revolutionary impact on Christianity by postmodern theology is seen in the hermeneutic of suspicion as practiced by radical feminists. In recent years this method has

caused quite an uproar in the United States, especially among presbyterians.

Radical feminists are especially determined to move far beyond the pale of the traditional faith. Elizabeth Shussler Fiorenza, at Harvard Divinity School . . . is one of many scholars at work on a feminist reinterpretation of the New Testament. Prof. Sallie McFague of the Divinity School of Vanderbilt University, whose *Models of God* won the American Academy of Religion Award of Excellence in 1998, passionately opposes the masculine imagery of God portrayed in Scripture and wants to get rid of all 'our safe havens, called dogmas and orthodoxy.' Margaret McManus of the Center for Women and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union, in Berkeley, California, said in 1992 that women's ordination was just the beginning and that equality was no longer the prime consideration. 'The issue is *transformation* of our religious institutions' (Reeves 1996: 179, italics added).

One might have seen that "transformation" being fulfilled in the radical Re-imagining Conference of the Presbyterian Church which was conducted in Minneapolis, Minnesota, November 4-7, 1993. The echoes from the uproar caused by that conference are still being heard in that denomination years later. "Three years in the planning, Re-imagining was a global theological colloquium of feminist voices. . . . And most significantly, the event bore the imprimatur of 'The Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women, 1988-1998,' initiated by the World Council of Churches and funded by some 20 ecclesiastical organizations, including the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the American Baptist Convention (ABC), the United Church of Christ, and four religious communities of Roman Catholics" (Edwards 1994: 39).

The Re-imagining Conference, by the use of ". . . 34 plenary addresses . . . small groups, workshops, ritual and worship, music, dance, plays, and visual arts, attempted to abandon traditional Christian teachings and creeds and substituted instead the mantras of radical

feminist ideology and theology. . . At the opening session, Mary Bednarowski, professor of religious studies at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities (Minn.), said, 'We have come together from many parts of the world to re-imagine our religious traditions.' ” (Edwards 1994: 39).

The idea of God presented at the conference was indicative of the wide diversity of religious convictions which characterized those who were present. It was not possible

. . . to identify a single prevailing view of God, for syncretism, polytheism, pantheism, and monism were all in evidence. But one thing was clear: the Triune God of Bible and creed was roundly circumvented. . . . At Re-imagining, the audience was invited to supply its own names for God: divine ancestor, mother God, lover, alpha and omega, fire of love, she who is eternal, Sophia, earth mother, spirit woman, cosmic maxim, ninjan, womb of creation, prime mover, and yin and yang. Jesus Christ was not named (Edwards 1994: 40-43).

Edwards concludes his report on the conference for Christianity Today magazine by describing the ritual of the worship of the goddess, Sophia and the renunciation of traditional churches by professor Virginia Mollenkott: “It may be necessary for the substantial liberated minority in every denomination to leave the denomination in order to form the holistic church” (Edwards 1994: 43). This last comment by Mollenkott shows some of the influence of Quine and his postmodern epistemological model of “webs” or networks of community knowledge.

The approach of Mollenkott may be the wave of the future in a postmodern age. The change in institutions can be seen in how people have increasingly come to regard religion of any kind. What matters most to these thinkers is *internal religion, a private faith*. This means that an idea or experience in religion is not true in itself but it *becomes* true only when it is internalized by the individual, thus making it a private truth. This is perfectly acceptable in today's intellectual environment, in fact, it is the norm. Such a religious experience or idea is “true” for that person,

sub-group, or tradition, but not necessarily for others. Accordingly, no religion is true in the objective or propositional sense. Therefore, it may be said, “that all religions are true subjectively” (Nash 1994: 60). In other words, since all of them are institutional expressions of personal preferences, one might take his pick of *any* of them and be none the better or worse off for it.

A privatized faith also provides an opportunity for the mixing or blending of diverse religious traditions. While this has long been characteristic of the more liberal expressions of Christianity, mixing belief systems has, in recent decades, also begun to have an affect on conservative evangelical Christianity especially among its younger people. Grenz uses the analogy of some people feeling comfortable with “incompatible clothing styles . . . [in like manner ^{NLM}] postmoderns feel comfortable mixing elements of what have traditionally been considered incompatible belief systems. For example, a postmodern Christian may affirm both the classic doctrines of the church and such traditionally non-Christian ideas as reincarnation” (1996: 15).

Representatives of mainline denominations have their own version of mixing incompatible doctrines and belief systems. Thomas Finger of Eastern Mennonite Seminary, though an evangelical in spirit, gives a somewhat more open and sympathetic perspective on the Re-imagining conference of Christian feminists. He writes:

In an atmosphere in which everything seems ‘black or white,’ we may overlook the fact that new worship forms involve creativity, and hence risk. This may frighten those attracted by the biblical Sophia [Proverbs 1-9, ^{NLM}] either into silence, or into the arms of the pagan Sophia’s more extreme advocates. To be sure, a line exists between truth and falsehood, and stand for truth we must. But even if we assess the effects of Re-imagining very negatively, biblical Christians do not need to conform to the polemical pattern of our age. In the current controversy, we need to see more of the patient, humble attitude that recognizes the danger of being too ‘simple’ or a

‘scoffer,’ and heeds the call to cry out for discernment, and lift up our voice for understanding . . . (Finger 1994: 45).

Another indication of the effect of postmodernism on Christianity may be seen in the theology of the unique American phenomenon called the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar, representative of the third quest for the historical Jesus, is a colloquium of scholars and others that meets periodically in the United States to consider what is “authentic and inauthentic” in the deeds and teaching of Jesus applying the empirical method only, a legacy of modernity. Using the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas along with the findings of the most radical historical criticism, the participants portray a Jesus vastly different from the one represented in the Gospels and epistles. Some critics maintain that the Seminar, like the quests before it, really presents a Jesus made in the image of its liberal participants. It has recently concluded its work on the sayings of the New Testament Jesus, finding only 18 percent of his sayings that could be considered “authentic.” William Willimon, Chaplain of the Duke University Divinity School, calls it “the last gasp of modernity — it’s the 19th century ‘quest’ redivivus, one last hurrah for the liberal Jesus” (1997: 1009).

Willimon, by his own confession, a postmodern Christian in the same mold as Thomas Oden, finds much in postmodernism to celebrate but considers the Jesus Seminar to be hopelessly outdated and in many ways an example of poor and inadequate scholarship. He lists some of the scholars involved in the Seminar such as Crossan and Borg but he directs most of his comments and questions to Borg whom he calls “irenic” in disposition. “Borg has certain postmodern tendencies that set him apart from some of his Jesus Seminar colleagues. Borg regards Jesus as a ‘spirit person,’ a challenging, enigmatic teacher who is peculiarly in touch with God . . . Borg wants a richer-textured portrait of Jesus, a Jesus who does not have to submit to our positivistic, materialistic criteria. Thus the term, ‘spirit person . . .’ (Willimon 1997: 1009). In a separate piece written for Christian Century magazine, Borg responds to Willimon’s

assessment of his position:

Though I am flattered that Will Willimon has exempted me from the nastier things said about the Jesus Seminar by some journalists and scholars, I want to add that I am not an exception [to the radical scholars that make up the Seminar NLM]. . . . The accusation that we are minimalists . . . flows from a misunderstanding of the single most-publicized of our activities: a voting procedure by which the seminar concluded that 18 percent of the sayings of Jesus in the Bible originated with Jesus. . . . But the 18 percent figure does not mean 'We think *only* these sayings go back to Jesus, but we think *at least* this much material goes back to Jesus. . . . I am a bit mystified by this. My work pervasively criticizes the modern worldview with its reductionistic understanding of reality (1997: 1011).

Borg insists that while he is a modern theologian he is as postmodern as Willimon even agreeing with the latter's renunciation of modernity. Like Willimon, he wants to pursue a postmodern "revisioning of Christianity," grounded in a cultural-linguistic understanding of Christianity as that which originates within a particular cultural tradition. Moreover, Borg agrees with Willimon and other postmodernists that one must reject "modernity's one dimensional worldview, its reduction of reality to matter and energy operating within the confines of the space time universe" (1997: 1013). He concurs

that postmodernity involves going beyond an Enlightenment paradigm. I agree that much of modern biblical criticism is either destructive of or irrelevant to the church's use of scripture. I agree that tradition and canon matter and constitute Christianity as a cultural-linguistic tradition. I agree that Jesus and the tradition call us to a way of life radically different from the life of the dominant culture, spiritually, as well as politically.

Like Willimon, I advocate 'letting Jesus have his way with us' (1997: 1013).

But if Willimon is right, Borg and his colleagues do their work in the Jesus Seminar far more within the confines of the fading modern consensus than not. Moreover, leaving Jesus

with only 18 percent (*at least* as Borg would put it) of what the New Testament records as authentic sayings does not leave much of a Jesus to have his way with anybody including Borg. Christians of every persuasion, in the light of this discussion, find ample reason to desire to get beyond *both* modernity and postmodernity.

Borg, his colleagues and many other postmodernist scholars, depend on “social location” as a key part of their biblical criticism. Social location, as an interpretational tool, is an aspect of Reader Response criticism. Such scholars, unlike traditional interpreters of Scripture, do not bring their culture to be critiqued by Scripture. Rather, they elevate the culture *above* the Word of God so that the culture critiques the Scripture. A rather startling example of this kind of thinking is as follows: Social location in biblical scholarship was evident in an international conference on biblical interpretation convened at the Vanderbilt University Divinity School on October 21-23, 1993. Out of that conference twenty major assumptions of social location Reader Response criticism were identified. Though of some length I believe that these assumptions are highly significant in that they show the ramifications of radical postmodern thought on any system of objective truth in the world today. Not all postmodernists concur with every conclusion. Nevertheless, here they are (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 219-221):

- (1) The biblical interpreter does not begin with the biblical text but with the reader.
- (2) The reader is unable to transcend his/her social location.
- (3) The various liberation theologies, whether racial or feminist are more interested in their ... agenda for liberations than ... what the Bible says.
- (4) True objectivity is impossible. At best, only a relative objectivity is attainable, for objectivity itself is a human construct.
- (5) All exegesis is eisegesis.
- (6) Socio-analytical reading of Scripture finds in the text what is relevant to the reader in his or her cultural location. The rest is ignored.

- (7) Global or universal interpretation of biblical texts is impossible. There are only local meanings.
- (8) The reader gives the biblical text its meaning.
- (9) The reader must liberate Scripture before it liberates the reader.
- (10) Victims, or the colonized, repudiate biblical texts that are products of oppressors, or the colonizers.
- (11) All Scripture is patriarchal or andro-centric, male-dominated and, therefore, is repudiated by feminist liberation.
- (12) Scripture was culture originated and can be rejected by readers living in the different social location of modern culture.
- (13) Readers need to appropriate Scripture to their social location.
- (14) Revelation never ceases. It is present in preaching today.
- (15) There are no absolute statements in Scripture.
- (16) Certain biblical texts are offensive to readers in cultural locations where their practice is different from that given in Scripture as in polytheistic culture.
- (17) Yet, the claim is also made that polytheism is taught in Scripture.
- (18) Pluralism is presented as true liberation beyond the narrower confines of Scripture.
- (19) Because of Scripture, the history of Christianity has been the most destructive in religion in history.
- (20) Because of Scripture, missionaries have equated deculturization as christianization. So to become a Christian, an Indian, for example, had to renounce his Indian culture.

[Number 15 is especially interesting since it affirms *absolutely* as to its *own* statement what it categorically denies to biblical statements — that there are no absolutes. NLM]

Nancy Ammerman presents a different reading of the influence of postmodernism in her critique of the moderate movement among Southern Baptists. She takes a sociological approach to postmodernism comparing the characteristics of modernity with those of postmodernism and organizing her theories around certain aspects of organizational structure. These, following

a series of contrasts drawn by sociologist Steward Clegg, she designates as activities, technology, organization, and relationships. Activities are based on “niche” marketing; technology, the range of choices made possible by the computer; organization, multiple skills, and relationships, decentralized and flexible relying on networks for interaction, a recognition that the best way to advance is by forming alliances (1993: 896-897).

One may be tempted, by now, to ask what all this has to do with Southern Baptist moderates. For one thing, Ammerman believes that moderates, having a much smaller base of support than that they had enjoyed in the larger Southern Baptist Convention, find themselves no longer able to provide all the services they once experienced. Therefore, they have forged links with other organizations that supply specialized services. She also thinks that the present Southern Baptist Convention structure is likely to stay close to its original bureaucratic form pointing out, as evidence, the recent moves made by that organization to strengthen its agencies by using well known pastors as corporation executive officers. On the other hand, she sees the religious left, as represented by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists, as being more innovative by staying closer to the *networks* (Quinian webs) of interest groups that make up their constituencies. As a partisan of the moderate movement among those once identified as Southern Baptists, Ammerman hopes that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, of which she is a part, will function as a different kind of model for new forms of denominational structures (1993: 899).

Ammerman does not seem to appreciate the irony of her comments. Postmodernism is more likely to mean the ultimate *end* of denominationalism altogether since its proclivity is for fragmentation rather than unity. Moreover, postmodernism is so pervasive now in the culture that Southern Baptists are experiencing many of the same characteristics of postmodern organizational life as everyone else. This is not to say that postmodern implications for organizational structure are unimportant. However, a more important issue might be that of the degree to which postmodern ideology is shaping the theology and practice of both groups.

Much of what has been described may cause many to ask: What has happened to American Christianity? It seems so unlike the virile faith that gave it birth. For instance, in the early days of Christianity, so powerful was the witness of slain martyrs that the new movement simply overwhelmed the Roman empire. Now, as in the case of the Re-imagining conference and the Jesus Seminar, the influence of culture seems to be overwhelming the institutional Christianity of the left and making serious inroads into evangelical Christianity as well. For the mainline denominations of America which have identified with the left socially and politically, Reeves believes that to be the case. “The faith has been overwhelmed by the culture, producing what may be called cultural Christianity. This is not a question of mere influence; acculturation takes place at all times and in all places. Christianity becomes cultural . . . when the faith is dominated by a culture to the point that it loses much or most of its authenticity” (1996: 67). But, aside from the influence of postmodernism on the Christian faith, one of the most dramatic outcomes of the influence of postmodernism may be seen in ethics. Culture, especially as it has defined what is right and wrong, has been profoundly affected by postmodernism.

3.3. Culture: Ethical Relativism

One of the clearest effects of postmodernism’s influence on Western culture is seen in its system of ethics. After all, it should not be considered an unexpected circumstance that when a culture moves epistemologically from objectivism to relativism it should also consequently produce significant implications for moral behavior. Whereas the culture’s previous commitment to objective truth had once centered its moral code on established moral principles, relativism has now effectively decentered it. Accordingly, ethics in the West has lost its focus for it no longer has an unified perspective for determining what is right and wrong. Instead, pluralism in social relations has given birth to pluralism in ethics. The well known poem of W. B. Yeats seems an appropriate way to describe that change:

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The Blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction,
While the worst are full of passionate intensity.

The center to which Yeats refers is not designated but for purposes of this work it will do to locate it in the transcendency of Christian ethics. With the coming of postmodernism this transcendent center of ethics has been eclipsed. Consequently, without an objectively based ethical system the culture has no transcendent way of locating ultimate meaning and purpose for its existence. Moreover, without such truth there is no foundation upon which to build *any* system of ethics not just the one based on Judaism/Christianity. This is why, in speaking of the event of postmodernism, Sire writes: “The horizon defining the limits of the world has been wiped away. The center holding us in place has vanished” (1997: 172).

For centuries Western culture had accepted an objectively based framework for ethics not only as one that would serve the culture well but that would also serve as an appropriate foundation for an acceptable moral code and legal system. Scott T. Walters gives a brief summary of that tradition:

For most of the history of the world, children were trained to act in accord with universal ethical standards. Aristotle wrote that the way to produce a good man was to habituate him to doing good things as a child. Not only were normative standards assumed, but rewards for telling the truth and penalties against lying were also a matter of course in such a system. The goal was to create an adult who naturally did the right thing; persons who were naturally wise, responsible, virtuous. Just as a trained cyclist doesn't have to think about which way to lean, so an honest man doesn't have to think whether to tell the truth (1999: 57).

But since that framework or worldview no longer prevails except for Christian fundamentalists and other minority subgroups, the result is a radical change in cultural ethics. With this loss of traditional ethics, the culture has provided a substitute that is relative and ever changing according to the fancy of its practitioners. It is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by individuals and communities. Accordingly, “things fall apart” in the culture. But how did this happen?

The greatest single factor is pluralism. Long before the epistemological system of postmodernism could take hold in the culture the West had begun to move away from virtue and theologically principled behavior. At the same time, science made it possible to shrink the cultural and logistical dimensions of Earth thus creating a global village. With access made possible by technology, people began to travel to other countries, immigration increased and with it came an ever expanding pluralism. Carson calls this demographic phenomenon “empirical pluralism” (1996: 13-17). The result was a multiculturalism that began to break down the distinctives that had once ordered and defined ethics for Western culture. Thus came the gradual breakdown of moral codes. As those who were taught right and wrong from their youth observed different moral codes and mores among diverse cultures they were hard pressed to believe that ethical systems were written in stone. “Who are we to say that we are right and they are wrong?” they asked. They found no satisfactory answer. Given that there are diverse moral codes in the world (including strict ones such as those of Islam and traditional ones such as those of the Chinese and Japanese), how can one arrive at any certainty that there is a universal law of what is right and wrong? Thus, postmoderns conclude that no one has the right to determine what is right or wrong for others, not even for one’s own children. Children must therefore determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong. Accordingly, this attitude that no one has the right to determine what is right or wrong except for oneself, aside from its potential for producing moral anarchy in the culture, also has given birth to another question: “Who are we

to judge?”

An example of this loss of moral distinctiveness was the impeachment trial in the United States of President Clinton in 1998. It has served to give credence to the idea that there has been a major shift in the standards of ethical behavior in the nation. Even though the *prima facie* evidence was overwhelming that the President had obstructed justice and had lied to the American people about it (Constitutional grounds for impeachment and removal from office), the public opinion polls repeatedly revealed that a majority of the people did not want the President prosecuted. No longer sure of what was right or wrong in that particular situation, and unwilling to assess the merits or demerits of an impeachment trial in the United States Senate, the lawmakers, in response to the moral ambiguity and ambivalence of the nation (and themselves) were unwilling to decide the case against the President refusing even to call witnesses in order to arrive at truth. (However, it must be acknowledged that the situation was complicated by a very strong national economy that seemed to make the president popular even though his behavior was deemed reprehensible by the majority of Americans.) The House of Representatives had voted to impeach the President but critics of that action claimed that they had voted as partisans rather than as unbiased jurists. Thus, there was no prosecution of the case. After all, as was the case before the President's impeachment proceedings, the prevailing attitude of people everywhere in this country is “that values are mere expressions of personal preferences” (Allen 1989: 18).

Without transcendent authority for ethics the outcome for the people is what some are choosing to call “ethical cultural relativism” (Grenz 1997: 1ff). Most people in this postmodern era seem content with doing whatever makes them feel good or happy. A common refrain for them is this: “If it *feels* good, do it!” The issue, then, when postmoderns are considering a particular course of action, is whether it will bring them pleasure if they engage in it, not whether it is morally right or wrong. This attitude is far from that which once characterized Western culture in matters of law and justice when Christian ethics served as the norm for the culture. Then the

moral issues were decided in favor of the prevailing moral consensus that certain things were allowed or forbidden on the basis of the Ten Commandments or some other Scriptural mandate. Accordingly, Supreme Court Justice David Brewer wrote in 1892 for the majority of the court in the case of *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*: “ ‘Our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian From the discovery of the continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making the affirmation . . . that this is a Christian nation’ ” (Carson 1996: 382-383). These statements, though only a hundred years or so in the past, if made by some member of the court in this postmodern age, would likely be met with scorn, jeers or disbelief.

Nevertheless, Justice Brewer’s ruling reveals that a univocal commitment to ethics once prevailed in America due to the influence of Judeo - Christian teachings about right and wrong. But things have radically changed since the last century. To demonstrate that change, Carson cites an essay by noted professor of Law Phillip E. Johnson in which Johnson quotes a portion of the late Arthur Leff’s speech to Duke University Law School, later published in the Duke Law School Journal:

I want to believe — and so do you — in a complete, transcendent and immanent set of propositions about right and wrong, *findable* rules that authoritatively and unambiguously direct us how to live righteously. I also want to believe — and so do you — in no such thing, but rather that we are wholly free, not only to choose for ourselves what we ought to do, but to decide for ourselves, individually and as a species, what we ought to be. What we want, Heaven help us, is simultaneously to be perfectly ruled and perfectly free, that is, at the same time to discover the right and the good and to create it (Carson 1996: 383; See also Leff 1979: 1229).

It is this transcendent center for locating what is right and wrong and the sense of ought-ness that defines it which is out of favor in this postmodern age. That of which Leff spoke no longer exists in our society except in some isolated segments of the culture. With its loss, however,

there has also been lost the unified vision that once gave common ethical guidance to nations. I refer, of course, to the Judeo-Christian view of ethics that was at the center of morals and law for centuries (Wilkes 1981: 28). Some have called it the moral imperative. Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, called it "the law written in their hearts" (Romans 2: 14-15). But this was before radical literary scholars determined that language is *in and of itself* incapable of conveying meaning thus rendering any text, ancient or contemporary, without authority, moral or otherwise.

Therefore, postmodern ethics is the result not only of pluralism and its social pressure to revise moral codes but it is also, as I have indicated, an outgrowth of literary theory. One would think that literary theory, whatever its hypotheses, would lack the power necessary to render meaningless, and thus without authority, the great texts of Western culture. But a growing number of respectable scholars have taken up just such a position. Stanley Fish is one of them. He is a literary critic who believes that language theory directly affects culture, not just the scholarly community. But the culture he is has in mind is that which is represented by interpretative communities. For Fish, literary knowledge is not a fixed entity of settled facts or data but a matter of whatever "the interpretative community" decides by consensus. "Last time I ended by suggesting that the fact of agreement, rather than being a proof of the stability of objects, is a testimony to the power of an interpretative community to constitute the objects upon which its members (also and simultaneously constituted) can agree" (Fish 1980: 338). This means, if Fish is right, that there is no *determinate* meaning for language, including the language of ethics, unless the community agrees. For him, there can never be an objective truth or standard because there is no provision in "the objectivist argument" for *disagreement* (Fish 1980: 338).

The consensus of which Fish speaks, when applied to moral concerns, therefore mitigates against ethical standards because the community (presumably by majority influence) determines what is right and wrong rather than an authoritative text whether it be the Bible or the Constitution. Thus, while the practice of lying may be considered wrong by one community, it

may not be so considered in another community. This understanding about *the limited nature* of all ethical systems is one of the reasons that the Ten Commandments and other so-called totalizing ethical formats can no longer be posted (as they once were) in school classrooms across America.

Ethics, then, in a postmodern age, is a *social construct* built on the premise of a certain way of using language. “Ethics, like knowledge, is a linguistic construct. Social good is whatever society takes it to be” (Sire 1997: 182). The issue for a society that accepts such relativism is whether the ethical system makes people feel good about themselves, that is, whether it contributes to an individual’s sense of personal worth (self-image). Thus, the self and what the self wants is the reality that counts in postmodern morality though some concur with the idea that like-minded “selves” may function effectively in a given community. Of course, this is what one would expect from a methodology that *constructs its own reality* hermeneutically. Based on the individualistic Reader Response theory of interpretation, the methodology actually goes back to the spirit of modernity when, following the counsel of the philosopher Protagoras, leading Humanists proclaimed that “man is the measure of all things.” Before that, in the premodern age, God had been the measure of all things. But modernity changed the formula from the primacy of God for the culture to the primacy of humanity. Postmodernity carried this understanding to its logical conclusion. If “man is the measure of all things,” then even texts are secondary and essentially exist to meet the needs of readers. Therefore, texts are used simply to highlight those needs. They have no authority of their own; authority is transferred to readers.

The refusal to accept a standard of absolute truth, then, means a loss of objective moral guidelines, a loss being keenly felt in this country at this time. Take, for example, the area of sexual morality. “In 1987, a supposedly conservative era already frightened by AIDS, only 46 percent — less than half — believed that premarital sex was wrong. In 1992, only 33 percent reject(ed) premarital sex. . . . These moral inversions are taking place not only in a secular world,

but within what passes as Christendom” (Veith 1994: 17).

This brings us to another way of looking at ethics, one that is older and far more stable, the way of Scripture. The Bible sets forth a clear and unequivocal description of what is right and wrong. The Decalogue, the statutory laws of Moses, and the exposition and strengthening of them by Jesus have constituted moral law in the West for centuries. For many this was both the premodern and even the modern way of looking at morality. Thus, an outcome of this stable view of ethics is the sense of “ought-ness” that pervades the biblical position on moral behavior. Ethics, then, has to do with what individuals and communities *ought* to do or as Kant emphatically put it: the *categorical* imperative. There have been other variations on this basic human sense of moral obligation but, in the last few decades, the culture seems to have rejected the moral imperative of ought-ness altogether. Obligation has therefore given way to personal preference. In more recent years, much has been made instead of the “new morality,” a term championed by Bishop James Pike of the Anglican Church. Pike’s new morality, a popular liberal antinomianism, seems to have passed as a fad with his unfortunate death in the Judean desert.

However, Joseph Fletcher (*Situation Ethics* 1966) presented a more scholarly and thoughtful approach. His work was a precursor for the ethics of postmodernism though it seems to have been more of a hybrid, that is, an amalgamation of the law of love and the relativism of moral existentialism. The basic idea was that certain things, like adultery, murder, lying, were wrong most of the time but not in *every* situation. Fletcher maintained that in some circumstances, love required a different approach. One might lie or commit adultery, or even commit murder, if it was the “most loving and responsible” thing that one could do in certain situations. Of course, there are indeed times, though rare in history, when it becomes more desirable and easier to get forgiveness than permission. An example is the noble history of Dutch Christians who hid the Jews while lying to the Nazis in order to protect them from certain deportation and genocide in the death camps. While this does not transform lying into a virtue,

it is certainly a far lesser wrong than that of apathy at the terrible plight of the Jews.

But the hybrid solution of Fletcher did not survive mainly because it attempted to straddle two issues: the objective status of the revealed biblical truths of love and justice and the subjective idealism of moral relativism. What really happens with situation ethics in practice, however, is that it is not love that usually prevails (after all, love is highly *subjective*) but power, the power to make up the rules of what is to be considered moral and yet change the rules whenever it is deemed necessary to do so. The power that once resided in authors or speakers to declare truth (e.g. Moses in the Decalogue and later, Jesus) came to reside in interpreters (readers) instead. This is part of what postmodernism has wrought in the culture. It works like this:

Excluding transcendent values places societies beyond the constraint of moral limits. Society is not subject to the moral law; it makes the moral law. If there are no absolutes, the society can presumably construct any values that it pleases and is itself subject to none. All such issues are only matters of power. Without moral absolutes, power becomes arbitrary. Since there is no basis for moral persuasion or rational argument, the side with the most power will win (Veith 1994: 159).

However, even though *the side with the most power* wins, there yet remains a conundrum for postmodern ethical systems. This is because ethical systems, as a matter of course, require that there must be some standard by which particular acts are judged or evaluated. For Christians that standard is God's law in the Old Testament and the Royal Law of Love in the New Testament. But, by definition, there can be no *standard* for *relativists*. How, then, can this dilemma for postmodern relativists be resolved? Walters says that Leff elaborated on the ethical dilemma of postmodern man in his famous lecture at Duke University in 1979 (1999: 59). According to Walters, Leff stated that the heart of the matter is that any *ought* statement assumes an authoritative evaluator.

If a person makes the assertion, 'It is wrong to commit adultery, he invites the

schoolyard statement, 'Says who?' [enunciated "sez" by young students_{NLM}]. Persons who want to commit adultery, or sympathize with those who do, can always give this rejoinder: What gives you the right to say what is good for me? In order to make any prescriptive statement, we must first establish that such a statement is authoritatively binding. Efforts to skirt the naturalist fallacy by proposing a minimalist or 'collective' benefits ethics still beg the essential question: What gives you (an expert, a government, a majority) the right to determine rightness for me? If any moral statement is to be insulated from criticism, the evaluator must be likewise insulated. . . . If it is to fulfill its role, the evaluator must be the unjudged judge, the unrulled legislator, the premise maker who rests on no premises, the uncreated creator of values. . . . What would you call such a thing if it existed? (Leff in Walters 1999: 59).

Of course, the answer that Leff was looking for was "God." But, in the world of postmodernism, the question of whether God exists or not is a matter for interpretative communities to decide. They may do so, of course, but since there are no absolutes to guide them, they can only rely on their own subjective opinions. One wonders if the exponents of that view understand the predicament that creates for ethics. "Either God does or does not exist. But, if not, nothing and no one can take the place of the final evaluator of good and evil" (Walters 1999: 59). Who, then, constructs an ethical system that has standards? Who determines the authority of that ethical system? Says who? This is the predicament of postmodern ethics. There is no standard, no objective evaluator, no authority other than self. When Leff concluded his remarks that day to the prestigious audience of law professors and jurists at Duke he made these salient points:

We are never going to get anywhere . . . in ethical or legal theory unless we finally face the fact that, in the Psalmist's words, there is no one like unto the Lord. If He does not exist, there is no metaphoric equivalent. . . . The so-called death of God turns out not to have just been *His* funeral; it also seems to have effected the total

elimination of any coherent, or even more-than-momentarily convincing, ethical or legal system dependent upon finally authoritative, extrasystematic premises (Leff 1979: 1229-1249).

What remains, then, in this postmodern age that will pass for an ethical system? Of course, there are law officers and the courts to uphold the prescribed laws of particular states but these are externally imposed restraints which are typical of lawful civilizations. What seems to remain in personal ethics is human beings attempting to do what they deem to be right for themselves or, if that cannot be determined, that which is expedient for the moment or occasion. One may also commit to the moral values of particular communities of like-minded participants but this will by its very nature be an ethical system without any controlling moral authority. While most postmodern ethics is relativist in nature, its most extreme expression takes on the character of solipsism. Solipsism, according to the Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, is: "(a) the theory that the self can be aware of nothing but its own experiences and states; and (b) The theory that nothing exists or is real but the self."

It is understandable, since the rationale for postmodernism is rooted in language studies, that we would eventually arrive at solipsism in our study of postmodern ethics. This is because literary study began with the author's intention (historical criticism), moved next to structuralism (the study of the semiotic and semantic limits of the text without regard to the author's intent), and finally to poststructuralism (located in the reader's response in language games with an indeterminate, unstable text). What we have left, therefore, in postmodern literary criticism is the sovereignty of the reader using the tool of deconstructionism to ferret out whatever he or she considers useful or valid in a particular text. This leaves us with a postmodern personal ethics that is often based on individual whim, an almost if not altogether narcissistic preoccupation with the impulses of the self. It can be no other way once the transcendent center of ethics, the objective truth of the Creator God is eclipsed.

Evidences of solipsism abound in the culture, among them, "a woman's right to choose an abortion," sexual promiscuity, as expressed in premarital sex and extramarital sex, drugs, "cop killing" rap lyrics, victimization as a defense for malefactors in court cases, and a general moral breakdown in law and order within cultural communities. These things have always been with us, of course, but in a postmodern culture these and similar acts are considered the norm for a liberated culture. After all, who is to say what is right or wrong and for whom?

But such moral relativism is very dangerous for any culture as past historical events have demonstrated. If, as postmodernism insists, no one can determine for others what is right and wrong, then, what happens to a culture when the rights of individuals conflict with what is deemed best for others or for the culture itself? An example might be the nihilism of "the reign of terror" in the French Revolution. Can individuals *avoid* acting in ways that indulge their selfish desires? If not, there may come a time when it will appear prudent to ensure that they be controlled for the greater benefit of society as construed by the elitists who happen to be in control of the institutions of culture at that time. This will inevitably be the case in a culture where there is no transcendent center of authority for ethics such as that which is available in the Judeo-Christian ethical system. In such a case, in a proleptic sense, B. F. Skinner was ahead of his time. Building on the rise of naturalism which grew out of the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, Skinner, along with others in his intellectual circles, concluded that humankind is merely animal in essence not a special creation of a transcendent God. Accordingly, human behavior can, in a fashion similar to that used in training animals, be programmed to perform in certain ways. Humans, therefore, are biological machines and, like machines, they must be programmed to act in certain ways that are deemed best for the good of society. (Certain areas of modern psychology already have some methods for this. An example is a therapeutic method called "Neuro-linguistic Programming" (NLP), a method in which a counselor uses the cues of the body's non-verbal communication to re-program the individual's personal responses.) Skinner explains why the

older system of reward and punishment is inadequate for building the right kind of behavior:

Man's struggle for freedom is not due to a will to be free, but to certain behavioral processes characteristic of the human organism, the chief effect of which is the avoidance of or escape from so-called 'aversive' features of the environment. . .

[Therefore, society must devise ways to _{NLM}] analyze and change the kinds of control to which it is exposed (1971: 42-43).

Skinner had confidence that humans could improve themselves through the right use of technology. He was convinced that since the Enlightenment ushered in the age of humans as autonomous beings they are able to make of themselves whatever they wish to be. "A scientific view of man offers exciting possibilities. We have not yet seen what man can make of man" (1971: 215). The problem, of course, is that Skinner's views are foundational, that is, they are based on the old modern model of scientific epistemology that is no longer considered viable with the arrival of postmodernism. What this means, then, in terms of using Skinnerian behaviorism to control postmodern human beings when they are out of control remains to be seen.

But postmodern ethical relativism can also affect how one may come to view theology. Vanhoozer points this out in his review of the work of Sallie McFague in her *Models of God* series. In these books McFague wrestles with the fundamental problem of indeterminate meaning and undecidability (issues of language theory). She takes for granted that the biblical ways of speaking about God, because they are metaphors, do not actually correspond to God's nature or his relation to the world. Rather, the metaphors create a model, a way for us to view God. Some biblical metaphors, however, are 'outmoded and oppressive.' We are therefore free to associate God with new semantic fields and thus to create new models or imaginative pictures. Though theology is 'mostly fiction,' McFague's central criterion about the worth of a metaphor is its 'appropriateness for our time.' Thus, Vanhoozer concludes that McFague "makes the pragmatist gambit [to _{NLM}] choose the metaphors for God and God's relation to the world that most enhance

the kind of life you prefer" (Vanhoozer 1998: 133). McFague therefore provides an example of how some can use postmodern language theory in such a way as to reconfigure theology so that it becomes, in effect, a *self serving* enterprise.

But there is a better way for the institutions of the West, a way that has been tried before but eventually rejected by the West for reasons that were not intellectually or logically justified. That way is a reestablished framework for viewing reality, the Christian worldview. Such a worldview, properly interpreted, makes for a more just, reliable, and stable culture. Postmodernism has fortuitously created an intellectual environment in which Christianity, once relegated to the margins of cultural ethos, can once again be given a respectful hearing. There are some reasons for this. We turn to those next.

PART TWO

THE REESTABLISHMENT

OF THE

CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Chapter 4

Postmodernity's Impact on Reestablishment

4.1. The Collapse of Modernity

For more than three hundred years Western civilization has been distinguished by an epistemology that applies the so-called *neutral* method of empirical research. Enlightened by rationalism and confirmed by an objective standard of truth, such a method has been considered completely trustworthy and its findings unassailable. Moreover, those who have employed this method agree that when properly used it invariably leads to technological advances that provide an ever improving higher standard of life for all. They further concur with the proposition that the findings of empiricism are applicable only to those things that apply to the natural order; they therefore have nothing at all to do with matters of faith or things that pertain to metaphysical interests. Thus, many have come to the conclusion that science is the only reliable guide to truth and, moreover, following the modern philosophies of Hume and Kant, that there is therefore an invincible barrier between the physical and the metaphysical, between faith and reason (Carson 1996: 67).

However, two factors in the last few decades of the twentieth century have called the above assumptions into serious question. First, developments in literary criticism, and more recently in scientific circles, have shaken the once facile confidence that researchers have had in the modern method of finding truth. Among those tenets of modernity that were once considered inviolable are the following: universal reason, neutrality in scientific observation, the objective knowledge of reality, undirected evolution, and the inevitable scientific progress of Western civilization. All these, and similarly related issues of modernity, are now being challenged everywhere by postmodernists.

Accordingly, in the judgment of a wide breadth of scholarship throughout the world these are indeed postmodern times. Furthermore, some of the popular scholars are quite categorical in their evaluation of the situation. For example, Veith is unequivocal in his assessment: "Now the assumptions of modernism have fallen apart, from Moscow to San Francisco. The Enlightenment is discredited. Reason is dethroned, even on university campuses. . . A new way of looking at the world is emerging" (1994: 29). Whether the situation is as settled as Veith's description requires may be too early to tell (Allen 1989: 6). But many agree with him that there is "a new way of looking at the world" including some who are major contributors to the postmodern intellectual environment. An example is Michel Foucault, the social and literary critic. He insists that *the age of reason*, as Thomas Paine called it, is over. He writes:

Mainly, it is the idea of modernity, of reason, we find in Lyotard: 'a grand narrative' from which we have finally been freed by a kind of salutary awakening. Postmodernity is a breaking apart of reason; Deleuzian schizophrenia. Postmodernity reveals, at least, that reason has only been one narrative among many others in history; a grand narrative, certainly, but one of many, which can be followed by other narratives (1994: 447).

Foucault is not a lonely voice crying in the cultural wilderness. Dissatisfaction with the so-called neutrality of objective reason, especially in "the assured findings of modern science," involves scholars on the right and left of the ideological spectrum. On the right, Francis Schaeffer, a noted evangelical critic of modernity, while not living long enough to see the full unfolding of the postmodern era, nevertheless seems to have anticipated its coming.

When I was younger, people would say that science is completely objective. Then, some years ago in Oxford, it began to be insisted that this is not true; there is no such thing as science without the observer. The observer sets up the experiment, the observer observes it, and then the observer makes the conclusions. Polanyi says the

observer is never neutral; he has a grid (a theory or worldview through which he sees and finds), he has presuppositions through which he feeds the things he finds. In science . . . (O)ne often finds that the objective reality is getting dim and that which remains is the model in the scientist's thinking (1982: 314-315).

The scientific method, with its emphasis on neutrality, is therefore under serious attack in the West though postmodernism's influence on empiricism itself is not at first obvious. It is not so much that postmodern philosophy has infected the scientific mind, that is, that there is a direct connection between the two, but rather that both postmodernism and science are moving forward on parallel tracks in the same epistemological direction, though at different speeds. For instance, the old Newtonian physics, as a system of objective neutral discovery, had once seemed inviolable but is now collapsing and with it the confidence of scientists that the universe is a "closed system" of cause and effect. This new situation has been brought about by recent research in quantum physics, following Max Planck, and a growing plethora of discoveries that reveal that the cosmos is far more complex than previously thought. Windschuttle elaborates:

David Stove attributes scepticism [about scientific objectivity NLM] largely to the impact on intellectuals made by Einstein's revolution in physics. For the two hundred years prior to Einstein's revolution, scientists had believed that Newton's laws of mechanics and gravitation had provided them with certainty. Einstein's demonstrations that this was not so, came as a great shock and, in the subsequent process of disillusionment, the notion of certainty itself was one of the major victims. Many philosophers concluded that, since Newtonian physics were not certain, nothing was (1996: 209).

What this means is that in the last 50 years a great deal of the confidence that science once had in its epistemological position is gone. Likewise, most Westerners had come to believe that science alone was qualified to decide the most important human values. This also is now considered an unjustified optimism in the sufficiency of scientific progress. We should not

conclude, however, that postmodernity has altogether *displaced* modernity in the thinking of the intellectual world. Nor is it likely that the average person has much awareness of these developments, at least not yet. As Carson has pointed out, “modernist and postmodernist views of science can exist side by side in the culture” (1996: 86). What is clear, however, is that “developments in the philosophy of science have shown, by one route or another, that anything complex in science is inevitably theory-laden, and all complex theories include components that are not themselves directly demonstrable by empirical means” (Carson 1996: 87, 90).

With these emerging changes in epistemological perspective I am herewith arguing that the developments of the past few decades in postmodern thought have been, in the main, salutary for the reestablishment of the Christian worldview. This is because the collapse of modernity, which in many ways has been an ideological opponent of Christianity, has now opened the way for a new consideration of all truth-claims (including those of Christianity) in a new and fertile intellectual environment. This does not mean, however, that modernity’s benefits (scientific discoveries, technological advances, improved living conditions, etc.) are any less appreciated by Christians than others. After all, very few Christians have expressed any desire to return to premodern conditions. Nevertheless, the new epistemological situation provides an opportunity for Christian scholars to engage in dialogue with those who have been formerly closed to the unique message of the Christian faith because of the adversarial stance that modernity has taken toward all things metaphysical. This is so even though, as some theologians have noted, Christians have thus far been slow to seize the opportunity that this new development has afforded. Perhaps this is because the move away from modernity has been a long time coming and its bias against Christianity exceptionally strong. With the arrival of the Copernican revolution, and after that the ascendancy of the naturalist premises of Darwinism, the world has long assumed that Christianity, as an ideological system, has been eclipsed. That assumption is now rapidly fading (Mohler in Dockery 1995: 77).

Does the collapse of modernity, then, argue for a return to orthodox or classical Christianity? It depends. Some have never left it. But they are on the periphery of respectability in secular scholarly thought (Marsden 1997: 13-24). What makes the situation different, however, is that postmodernism has removed the boundaries that once separated ideological positions so that all positions can now gain a new hearing (Foucault 1994: 447). This creates an opportunity to draw Christianity back to the center of viable alternatives to modernity (and postmodernity) since there is now an ideological vacuum. This is because “the intellectual culture is [now NLM] admitting that it has no foundation for truth” (Veith 1994: 63).

Christians should therefore seize this opportunity for the reestablishment of the Christian worldview before the epistemological vacuum is filled by some other ideology. Two roads lie ahead, the one taken by liberals who have already accommodated their thinking to the tenets of modernity (Murphy 1996: 71), and the one not yet taken because those who have held to orthodox faith have historically retreated from the culture. While that road remains open, it is yet to be seen whether Christians will take advantage of this opportunity.

Allen encourages Christians to believe that the barriers which were erected against faith during the modern period have now been removed thus clearing the way for a new intellectual respectability for the truth claims of Christianity. Hence, Christians need return neither to the arid rationalism of the Enlightenment worldview nor to the limited worldview of premodernity:

Although the intellectual situation today is vastly more favorable than it has been in recent centuries, the dust from the collapse of the modern mentality has not yet settled so that everyone can see that we are in a new situation. In addition, many of the principles of the modern mentality have deeply penetrated Christianity itself. We have incorporated within Christianity so many of the attitudes and convictions of the modern mentality that we have become incapable of achieving ‘the full wealth of conviction.’ . . . Are the Christian churches ready to meet the challenge? . . . it is

only when people find themselves actually receiving God's grace and interacting with God that their minds and hearts achieve the full assurance of conviction in the truth of Christianity. It takes not only thinking but also action to achieve conviction (Allen 1989: 6-7).

The "full wealth of conviction" of which Allen writes has been adversely affected by an understanding of science that has prevailed until recently that the universe is a closed system of cause and effect. Moreover, such Newtonian determinism, especially when coupled with scientific naturalism, seemed to leave no room for the Judeo-Christian position that the natural order, though marred by human sinfulness (Romans 8: 20), nevertheless reflects the glory of the God who has purposefully created all things. The new physics of Einstein (along with the emerging mentality of postmodernism) has called into serious question the once easy confidence that moderns have had in the idea of a closed cause and effect system of naturalism.

4.2. New Paradigms in Science: Intelligent Design

Change in scientific thinking, especially insofar as it concerns major paradigms, is certain but slow and its turn into any new epistemological direction gradual. Nevertheless, with the coming of postmodernism, the pace of that change has begun to quicken. For example, the so-called *anthropic principle* (anthropocentrism) has returned to science long after it was supposedly put to rest by the Copernican revolution. Copernicus had shown that Earth was neither the center of the universe nor the solar system and thus, with his discovery, the biblical idea that humans were the goal toward which God's creative activity had been directed began to lose its credibility as a worldview. Now, with the rising ascendancy of what is called "Intelligent Design" the anthropic principle, that is, the idea that the cosmos actually exists *for the sake of humankind* (Geisler 1999: 26), has returned. Intelligent Design (ID), therefore, means that the cosmos is not the result of chance, as Darwin had proposed, but of purpose (design). This emphasis on intelligent design and on the idea that the universe is finely tuned and sustained

(Colossians 1:16-17) for the purpose of making Earth habitable for humans is not just coming from theologians, as might have been expected, but from an increasing number of scientists who have arrived at their position through careful observations in the fields of astronomy, physics, genetics, and bio-chemistry. Accordingly, they have concluded that the cosmos is fine-tuned by intelligent design not only to accommodate life but to preserve it. Michael Denton is one of them.

Denton is the author of *Nature's Destiny, How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe* (1998). He is a leading New Zealand Senior Research Fellow in Human Molecular Genetics, and a proponent of "directed evolution" as over against the "undirected evolution" of Darwinists. Some think of these different approaches as "micro-evolution" and "macro-evolution." The latter is the doctrine that the biosphere has evolved by natural selection from the simple to the complex (Darwin's theory). The former simply sees change as occurring on a minute scale *within the species* without any movement whatsoever from one species to another. Directed evolution, however, goes a step further than this. It maintains that whatever changes occur within species are the result of purpose and not chance.

What is now developing in science, then, is a new appreciation for the idea that the cosmos may have been designed teleologically to favor the existence of life. For example, World Magazine has recently reported that recent research on stellar production rates has confirmed the anthropic principle that the universe is finely tuned to support life. This work was done by Heinz Oberhummer, an astrophysicist at the University of Vienna in Austria and two of his colleagues. They deduced that if the physical forces within stars were only *slightly* different our universe would be almost entirely devoid of carbon and oxygen and life would not exist.

We conclude that a change of more than 0.5% in the strength of the strong interaction or more than 4% change in the strength of the Coulomb [electrical charge _{NLM}] force would destroy either nearly all C [carbon _{NLM}] or all O [oxygen _{NLM}] in every star. This implies that irrespective of stellar evolution the contribution of each star

to the abundance of C or O in ISM would be negligible. Therefore, for the above cases the creation of carbon based life in our universe would be *strongly disfavored*. . . the results of this work are relevant not only for *the anthropic cosmological principle* but also for the mathematical design of fundamental elementary particle theories (Oberhummer 2000: 90, italics added).

Nancy Percy, the reporter for World continues: “Mr. Oberhummer and his colleagues used computers to simulate the process by which helium burns to produce carbon and oxygen during the red-giant stage of a star’s life. They found that even slight changes in either the strong or weak nuclear force would destroy nearly all the carbon or oxygen inside stars — making life impossible” (2000: 17). Ms. Percy reports that Mr. Oberhummer and his fellow researchers ‘have no idea why the strengths of the forces are fine tuned’ to support life but that “the reasonable answer seems to be that *someone* intended it that way” (2000: 17).

Other physicists disagree with the notion of intelligent design as an explanation for the fine tuning of strong and weak forces preferring instead the strange alternative that there are an infinite number of universes that exist simultaneously with ours but that they are dark and lifeless. They concede, however, that such universes would, by definition, be undetectable and therefore outside the realm of scientific observation. Percy concludes her article on these recent developments with the following summation:

This year’s Templeton prizewinner, Freeman Dyson, muses that ‘the universe in some sense must have known we were coming.’ Of course, the idea of a conscious universe, or of unknowable universes sprouting like mushrooms [an alternative to intelligent design_{NLM}], goes beyond science and into philosophy. This opens a new opportunity for Christians, says philosopher William Lane Craig. ‘Cosmology has broken down the boundary between physics and metaphysics [a boundary of modernity erected by Hume and Kant_{NLM}], and once the door is opened to metaphysics, you can’t stop the theist from coming in the door, too.’ (2000: 17).

Robert Jastrow, the famed astronomer, is no theist but he concludes his book, *God and the Astronomers*, with this now familiar statement: “For the scientist who has lived by faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountain of ignorance: He is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries” (1978: 116).

On the other hand, other scientists are not quite so ready to embrace the idea that the universe is anthropocentric. Rather, they hold to the hope that life may yet be found elsewhere in this universe, a discovery that would probably settle the question of whether homo sapiens is unique. Nevertheless, the evidence for an anthropocentric universe is quite strong and growing.

If our solar system was ever inhabited or visited by intelligent beings, they left long ago and left no sign that we can read. Nor have any radio or optical signals ever been detected that provide evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. Occasionally, astronomers pick up an unusual signal from some previously unremarkable point in the sky, and for a moment there stirs a faint hope that it might be an intelligent signal from another world. Despite the lack of such evidence, the concept remains a potent force. As Sagan confesses, “There is something irresistible about the discovery of even a token from an alien world.’ Yet no matter how deeply ingrained the concept of extraterrestrial intelligence, to date neither the direct exploration of Earth nor of our nearest planetary neighbors have produced the slightest evidence for intelligent life beyond the earth. The empirical way has in effect failed. The concept of the cosmos as uniquely fit for our existence and the presumption of our teleological centrality remain intact. After four centuries of ceaseless searching, Earth has yielded no clue, the heavens remain eerily silent, and even Mars now threatens to disappoint. We still have at present no direct empirical evidence that the laws of physics might permit the existence of life or of intelligent beings designed along principles fundamentally different from those governing life on Earth (Denton 1998: 377-378).

We must understand, however, that Denton is not arguing against the hypothesis that life exists elsewhere in this vast universe; we simply have no way of knowing that at this time. What he is arguing, however, is that *if* life exists elsewhere in the cosmos it will be similar in its chemical components *to life on this planet*. This is because all the matter that has been examined so far (e.g., from the Moon, asteroids, Mars) is found to consist of the same constituency of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and other atoms, 92 of them, according to Denton (1998: 75), that are everywhere common in space. This is also what would be expected if the current model for the origin of the universe, the “Big Bang,” holds up, that is, that all the matter currently in the universe would have been present in some form at the moment of explosion and has been expanding ever since. However, contrary to the tenets of naturalism, none of this just happened. Rather, it was directed by the Super Intelligence that belongs to God alone. “. . . there is no avoiding the conclusion that the world looks as if it has been uniquely tailored for life; *it appears to have been designed*. All reality appears to be a vast coherent, teleological whole with life and mankind as its purpose and good” (Denton: 1998: 387, italics added).

Denton argues that a universe that is perfectly counter-balanced gravitationally and finely tuned for life is absolutely necessary to support life on a *single* planet such as the Earth. He supports his position with chapter after chapter of corroborating evidence referring to the phenomenon of “just right” forces and components as “the long chain of coincidence” (1998: 369-389). As to “Intelligent Design” or “Teleological Theory,” he claims the support of wide ranging research including scientists of the highest rank among their peers, among them Jastrow, Freeman Dyson, Fred Hoyle, Martin Rees, and Paul Davies. “Reinforcing the teleological position is the fact that its credibility has relentlessly grown as scientific knowledge has advanced throughout the past two centuries” (1998: 384, See also Hugh Ross in Dembski 1998a: 371).

But the paradigm of naturalism is not given up easily. Darwinists, and their supporters, are reluctant to entertain any notion of purpose in the universe.

Not all scientists see that excluding intelligent design artificially restricts science, however. Richard Dawkins, an arch-Darwinist, begins his book *The Blind Watchmaker* by stating, 'Biology is the study of complicated things that give the *appearance* of having been designed for a purpose.' Statements like this echo throughout the biological literature. Francis Crick, Nobel laureate and codiscoverer of the structure of DNA, writes, 'Biologists must constantly keep in mind that what they see was not designed, but rather evolved' (Dembski 1998b: 21).

Jacques Monod is another who sees no master designer at work in the universe. Yet, he wonders how blind chance could produce *apparent* design. He ruminates:

While one ponders the tremendous journey of evolution over the past three billion years or so, the prodigious wealth of structures it has engendered, and the extraordinarily effective teleonomic performances of living beings, from bacteria to man, one may well find oneself beginning to doubt again whether all this could conceivably be the product of an enormous lottery presided over by natural selection, blindly picking the rare winners from among numbers drawn at utter random (Monod 1971: 138).

Unlike Monod, Davies acknowledges that the evidence for a designed cosmos is more than apparent though he is not as ready as Denton to conclude that the matter of intelligent design is settled. He calls ID the "specialness" doctrine of a growing number of scientists:

The specialness argument I have been discussing refers not to this or that niche, but to the underlying laws of physics themselves. Unless those laws meet certain requirements, life won't even get started. Obviously carbon-based life could not exist if there were no carbon. But what about alternative life forms, much beloved of science-fiction writers? Once more we cannot really know. If the laws of physics differed a bit from their actual form, new possibilities for life might arise to replace the lost possibility of life as we know it. Set against that is the general view that

biological mechanisms are actually rather specific and difficult to operate, and would be unlikely to emerge from a haphazard arrangement of physics. But until we have a proper understanding of the origin of life, or knowledge about alternative life forms elsewhere in the universe, the question must remain open (Davies 1992: 205).

The key word for Davies is “open.” Though he does not come down as emphatically on the side of intelligent design as Denton he leaves the issue open which is just what is to be expected in the new situation influenced by postmodern thinking. There is a great deal of research on the concept of intelligent design currently underway by leading scientists (Behe, Denton, Jaki, Johnson, et al) but, given the limits of this work, I cannot pursue this matter much further except to point out once again that such a theory is more appropriately considered in a postmodern intellectual environment.

Previously, as I have intimated, those who had been trained to think that science had won the day against faith believed that modernity had closed off all routes to an intelligent faith in God. Monod honestly confesses the existentialist mood of one who views a cosmos without God. “The ancient covenant is in pieces; man knows at last that he is alone in the universe’s unfeeling immensity, out of which he emerged only by chance. His destiny is nowhere spelled out, nor is his duty. The kingdom above or the darkness below: it is for him to choose” (Monod 1971: 180).

Contrary to Monod’s apologetic for the biosphere emerging by chance is the work of noted biochemist Michael Behe. Behe maintains that many biological organisms (including aspects of cellular micro-factories) are *irreducibly complex* and that therefore they could not have even begun to function in any incipient way except in tandem with the other parts of those respective organisms. An example would be the eye. The human eye, especially, is amazingly complex and Monod’s evolution by *chance* simply begs the question of how such an organism could function at all by gradual stages of development from the simple to the complex as undirected evolution seems to require. Therefore, it is obvious to scientists like Behe that the human eye is *designed* to

function as it does. Accordingly, Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box* (1996) assumes an opposite point of view from Dawkin's widely accepted *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) and is causing quite a stir in scientific circles. "Within the past four decades science has advanced to the point where it has been able to isolate many of the components of the cell and understand in some detail how they work. With the background discussion in place we now must ask whether any biochemical systems are irreducibly complex. It turns out that many are" (Behe in Dembski 1998a: 180). Dembski also thinks that Behe's theorem is a formidable denial of natural selection. He elaborates: "For an irreducibly complex system, function is attained only when all components of the system are in place simultaneously" (Dembski in *First Things* 1998b: 25).

At the close of the nineteenth century, James Orr had concluded that Darwinism, as Monod suggested, had eroded the capacity of Western thinkers to believe in a divinely ordered universe. Darwin, through his books, *On The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, had destroyed the confidence of modern man in the idea of a purposeful or designed cosmos (Orr 1893: 109). Orr tells of the effect of such ideas on a friend whose faith had been eroded by the conclusions of naturalism. His reference to Professor Clifford's agnosticism underscores the sadness of lost faith in God's creative power. He records Clifford's lament.

It cannot be doubted that the theistic belief is comfort to those who hold it, and that the loss of it is a very painful loss. It cannot be doubted, at least by many of us in this generation, who either profess it now, or have received it in our childhood, and have parted from it since with such searching trouble as only cradle-faiths can cause. We have seen the spring sun shine out of an empty heaven to light up a soul-less earth; we have felt with utter loneliness that the Great companion is dead (Orr 1893: 83).

Clifford's experience of the loss of a sense of God's presence because of the spirit of modernity's embrace of naturalism is one reason that the reestablishment of the Christian worldview should be an important priority for this postmodern age. It is true, of course, that in

the final analysis one's faith in God can be neither nourished or negated by the findings of modern science. We have also come a long way from Aquinas' natural theology and the need for proofs of God's existence. Nevertheless, postmodernism has been helpful to the Christian worldview in the sense that it has opened up new possibilities for the intelligent consideration of data (One thinks of Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA.) that did not exist in the modern period of Orr and Clifford when the universe was perceived by scientists as a closed system of cause and effect (meaning not open to alternative or extra-scientific explanations).

Postmodernism is also having a significant impact on the central icon of modern science: Darwinism. For example, the critical method of deconstructionism has recently been applied effectively against Darwin's theory of "natural selection," an essential feature of his theory of evolution. Veith places that issue in the light of postmodern theory:

Is Darwin's theory of evolution a scientific fact or is it a construction? Darwin's theory can be reconstructed putting it in the context of his time and by paying close attention to his figures of speech. His theory of evolution argues that progress [in the development of species NLM] comes from free competition and the survival of the fittest. Is this biology or is it a description of nineteenth century *laissez-faire* capitalism? Is this objective science or is it also an assertion of power — an attempt to rationalize British imperialism, the rich oppressing the poor, and other predatory behavior by turning it into a law of nature? Thus contemporary postmodernism might deconstruct Darwin. . . (1994: 64).

Now I offer a caveat. Though modernity has been problematic for Christianity, this does not mean, on the other hand, that postmodernity has provided an unalloyed benefit. To the contrary, Christians would do well to be wary of its ideology also. This is because, as with postmodernity, Christianity is under attack on *different* grounds than those of modernity. Modernists had argued that Christianity was not true because its faith was not verifiable by the evidence available to

empiricism. Postmodernists, however, take a different approach. They argue that Christianity, as a metanarrative, should be rejected because it actually claims *to already possess truth* about God and the cosmos. For them, since there is no objective truth, only the constructs of particular interpretative communities, the claim of Christians to possess truth is an affront to the postmodern commitment to pluralism. As far as they are concerned, even if there were truth, Christians must not think that *they* have it. In other words, the “claims of Christianity are not denied; they are rejected *because* they purport to be true” (Veith 1994: 19-20, italics added).

It is indeed the case that Christians, because of divine revelation, claim to possess the truth about God and the universe which he has created. Moreover, the validity of Christian truth claims is being challenged not only by postmodernists but also by some who have long been engaged in the modern critical study of the Bible as well. For instance, the more radical historical critics have contested many of the biblical claims of supernatural phenomena such as miracles, the incarnation of Christ, and the resurrection from the dead. However, recent changes in postmodern literary theory, while not necessarily calling into question the *results* of historical study, have challenged the critics’ insistent assertions of scientific objectivity. These changes have had a profound effect upon the academic discipline of all critical research, including biblical studies.

4.3. New Paradigms in Critical Studies

Critical studies in the last two centuries have been guided, in the main, by modern principles of rationalism and empiricism. Commitment to those principles led critics to full confidence in the scientific reliability of their scholarly work. Likewise, they were certain that their use of the appropriate methodological tools would produce end-products that reflected the neutral and unbiased objectivity of their research. Furthermore, critics assumed that the first step in arriving at the “assured results of historical criticism” was the discovery of the author’s intent. Postmodern

critical studies, however, start not with the author's intent to communicate meaning but with the reader's determination to demystify whatever motives to power lay concealed behind the author's words. Nor are postmodern critics all that assured about the results of their work since they have little confidence that meaning is possible given their shared conviction of the indeterminacy and instability of language. Nevertheless, the oldest literary criticism, when applied to the Bible, treated the texts of the Gospels and the Epistles as literary wholes. Indeed, such a judgment is consistent with the nature of authorship since it is assumed that an author has a coherent theme in mind when he writes. But, with the assumption of the demise of the author, as in postmodern literary criticism, that has changed. Now texts are viewed as literary fragments (pericopes) with no unity of authorship implied. Though not the original intent, historical criticism, particularly in its later development in Form Criticism, helped prepare the way for the new paradigms of critical study. With its emphasis on "the sociological environment of the Scriptures" (Krentz 1975: 31) as the determining factor in the development of the Gospels, Form Criticism maintained that they were not reliable *historical* accounts but *interpretations* of the life of Jesus. Whether these were faithful or fallible interpretations, of course, was a matter that could only be determined by scientific study. If the Gospels were not eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus (as Form Critics maintained), then the transition to construing them as "constructs" of the first century Christian interpretative community would inevitably follow. And this is indeed what has happened with postmodern biblical scholarship as witnessed in the Jesus Seminars of Borg and Crossan. "But now New Testament scholarship has moved well *beyond* Form Criticism" (Nash 1994: 78, italics added).

Perdue confirms the notion that some of the elements of what has come to be called postmodernism were already resident in historical criticism: "With the rise of historical criticism, beginning with the Enlightenment, the connection between the literal meaning of the biblical stories and their reference to actual events began to break down. . . Thus the 'truth' of biblical

narratives, or their reality, could be affirmed only by fitting them within either the framework of a modern perception of reality or history *reconstructed* by biblical criticism” (1994: 236, italics added). Perdue explains the practical impact of such reconstruction on readers:

Instead of readers fitting within the biblical reality, now the biblical story had to be placed within *their* reality . . . If narrative references to historical events were discovered to be false, then interpreters could argue that [at least NLM] the message or spiritual meaning of the biblical stories could be true. This resulted, however, in the conviction that meaning, and therefore religious truth, should be detached from the story itself. . . . Thus biblical theology and historical criticism became very different interpretative enterprises. . . . Subsequently, a dichotomy was made between meaning and reference, that is, what the story says, and what it is about. In effect, biblical narrative was denied a direct role in the presentation of theology and in the hermeneutical enterprise. Biblical narrative was ‘eclipsed’ (1994: 236-237, italics added).

Vanhoozer (1998: 156) submits a helpful summary of the different positions that have developed in critical methods since the modern period began. Each of them reflects the particular interests of readers:

1. The author’s intent; the history of the text’s composition (such as source, form, redaction, and tradition criticism)
2. The literary or structural features of a text (Structuralist Criticism)
3. The way a text works and achieves its effects (Rhetorical Criticism)
4. The possible ways of being in the world that a text displays (Existentialist Criticism)
5. The way a text depicts women (Feminist Criticism)
6. The way a text aids or hinders social transformation (Liberationist Criticism)
7. The way a text resists unified interpretation (Deconstructive Criticism)

It should be observed in Vanhoozer’s list that only the first approach reflects the older

method of historical criticism. The others are variations of postmodern critical paradigms. Because of this, one senses that historical criticism really is out of place in the list being outmoded, as it is, in a postmodern age. This is because historical criticism had traditionally focused on the *intention of the author* while postmodern criticism focuses on the *reader's response*, or as in some cases, as in numbers 5, 6, and 7, the ways the text aids or resists the contemporary concerns of certain interpretative communities. Krentz describes the purpose of number 1 in the list. "First, one finds out all one can about the author and his situation, for his state of being affects his composition" (1975: 51). In postmodern criticism, however, one is not primarily concerned with the author's intent or his social environment. The critic uses the text, or plays language games with the text, in order to discover meaning that makes sense in *his* or *her* own existential situation. Moreover, critics think it irrelevant to know the author's actual meaning anyway since, in their judgment, the author's writing reflects not only his or her thoughts but the thoughts of many others who influenced the author to think as he or she does. Strictly speaking, then, a place for the author's intent is no more justified in critical study than is a place for the collective ideas of his mentors. After all, postmodern poststructuralist critical paradigms have gone beyond all that.

The tension between the older criticism and the new critical paradigms of postmodernism was reflected in the conversation of Patristic scholar, Thomas Oden and famed biblical critic, Raymond Brown. Oden spoke out of a postmodern context: "I would like to see the hermeneutics of suspicion [number 7 in Vanhoozer's list _{NLM}] applied directly to where the biblical critics are standing" (Neuhaus 1989: 127). Oden took the rather extreme position of maintaining that he saw nothing of enduring value in the historical critical method. Brown disagreed. He indicated that, while the historical-critical method provided nothing essential for salvation, it did remove obstacles to faith. Brown would have nothing to do with the more radical historical critics, however, choosing rather to identify himself as a "moderate critic." The conference concluded with a resolution by the participants that they would pursue what they labeled Method C as a

postmodern tool of exegesis. Method C, as we shall see below, is an alternative to what the participants considered to be the rather arid nature of historical criticism. It focuses instead on the faith building response of the Christian interpretative *community* to biblical narrative (Neuhaus 1989: 127-128).

In postmodern literary theory, the reader *must* become dominant in hermeneutics because postmoderns have despaired of finding determinate meaning in texts. This is because, in the famous words of Derrida, “there is nothing *outside* the text.” This means, according to him, that “texts can only refer to *other* texts” (1997: 77-80, italics added). Or, as Rorty has reportedly said, “‘It is words, all the way down’” (Carson 1996: 10). However, it is not that the text means nothing at all for that would be an absurd proposition. Rather, the text *petrifies* meaning, that is, it preserves a time-warped perspective that, while at one time of indisputable concern to the writer, no longer holds interest to postmodern readers except wherein it coincides with and/or confirms their own efforts to *create* meaning. Thus, for postmoderns, the text *by itself* reveals nothing that is universally applicable, that is, it speaks nothing that is determinate about anything. Texts are therefore unreliable as sources for truth claims. They do, however, serve interpretative communities as sources for their distinctive narratives.

Therefore, Derrida and the deconstructionists ask us to choose between the arbitrary certainty that once characterized the modern way of thinking and the utter skepticism which leads to the hermeneutic of suspicion. However, in an environment in which a text is nothing more than the reflection of someone’s bias toward power can knowledge, meaning, and ethics have any meaningful foundation? The answer for postmodernists, of course, is no (Vanhooser 1998: 211). But for Christians, and those who would give a respectful hearing to the truth claims of the Scriptures, the answer is assuredly yes. This brings us, then, to a transition in using postmodern critical study as a possible way to bridge the gap between the older critical study with its “assured results” and the newer hermeneutical possibilities that make the reestablishment of

a Christian worldview viable in a postmodern age. In short, we must be willing to interpret within the parameters of two horizons of understanding:

From our study of history we have become conscious that the character of all human experience, concepts, and institutions are conditioned by time, place, and circumstance. This is nicely captured by a term used by Husserl and adopted in hermeneutics, 'horizon.' All of us live within a horizon, and we perceive and understand within the limits of that horizon. . . . This brings us to the 'hermeneutical question,' as it is called, the question of how to understand or to interpret texts from periods and cultures that are not our own. Just as we exist within a horizon, so too does a particular text have its own horizon. We thus have the world of the text and the world of the interpreter. Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of how we bring them together so that understanding is possible. Such an understanding is said to involve a 'fusion of horizons,' a phrase coined by Gadamer (Allen 1985: 272).

However, Gadamer refused to accept the judgment of postmodernists that words are not fit for stable communication. He insisted that the author and the reader be treated as interdependent agents of meaning. This required the reader to attempt an intersection of his world with that of the text thus bringing about a "fusion" of horizons (Gadamer 1976: 209-211). The two horizons of Gadamer, which originated with the language formula of Husserl (Linge in Gadamer 1976: xliii), not only recognized the dynamics of the reading process but also exposed the chasm that exists between author and reader, the impediment of which has been called "Lessing's ugly ditch." Thus, bridging the gap between the world of the author and the world of the reader has never been easy. It is not uncommon that such a formidable task, therefore, requires the assistance of an interpreter (Acts 8: 26-31), a task that the New Testament assigns to the Holy Spirit (John 16: 12-14).

This brief review of modern and postmodern literary theory reveals a number of new

possibilities in hermeneutics. Though there are extremes in the theory that are not helpful for arriving at meaning there are also some positive contributions. We turn to those next.

4.3.1. Postmodernity's Effect on Historical Criticism

In those days when historical criticism claimed the full confidence of the academic world, students were accustomed, as I have indicated, to hearing in lectures and reading in theological critical journals the overly confident phrase, “the assured results of historical criticism.” This phrase was taken to mean that the historical critic’s judgment about a matter — e.g., the disputed authorship of 2 Peter or the denial of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, etc.— had settled it for all reasonable persons. One seldom hears that phrase any longer. We are indeed in a new day in critical studies.

While we can appreciate the efforts of historical critics to recover as much as possible of the original context of the biblical text, there is much more to biblical interpretation than historical origins. Gradually, scholars have come to understand that historical criticism has left us with a biblical text that is too “thin.” “A ‘thin description of a text’ is one that offers a ‘minimal account only.’ The description is thin because it omits the broader context of the event [any biblical event NLM] that alone enables it to appear as an intended action. In consequence, thin descriptions suffer from a poverty of meaning” (Vanhoozer 1998: 285).

This impoverishment of the text so skews the understanding of “what the text means” that the biblical interpreter is left with the dry bones of an emasculated Bible. What is needed is “thick description,” the full panoply of both exegesis and exposition. Vanhoozer thinks that this is just what Karl Barth attempted to do with his rather exhaustive systematic theology in his monumental *Church Dogmatics*. He explains why he thinks Barth endeavored to do this.

The crisis in biblical interpretation affects both the academy and the church. Since the Enlightenment, most biblical scholars in the university adopted a strictly historical

approach to the biblical texts in order to concentrate on “facts” rather than ‘values.’ Among both liberal and conservative exegetes, the text came to be seen as a means to a historical end, namely, the reconstruction of what really happened. In particular, biblical critics spent considerable energy in a valiant, though ultimately vain, attempt to reconstruct the history of a text’s composition. Increasingly, the historical-critical method displaced other methods of reading the Bible and, at least in the university, was thought to be the *only rational approach* to the text (Vanhoozer 1998: 284-285, italics added; also see Barth 1955: xii-xiii).

Barth’s comment on the publication of the critical commentaries that flowed from the pens of historical critics reveals an exasperation with the “thinness” of textual understanding they exhibited: “My complaint is that recent commentaries confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary. . . . For me, at any rate, the question of the true nature of interpretation is the supreme question” (1957: 6, 9).

Lost in the often repeated scholarly mantra of “the assured results of historical criticism” is the truth of what the Bible is actually *about*. For example, a connoisseur of art does not focus on the mere etchings of the paint that Rembrandt used in a particular masterpiece with undue concern for the origin of its chemicals but on the detail, proportionality, beauty, and especially the *meaning* that Rembrandt intended. Likewise, the biblical materials are so much more than the mere magnification of the historical facts of their origins makes it possible to know. Though such data is of obvious importance, historical criticism, influenced as it has been by the tenets of rationalism and empiricism which characterized the Enlightenment, has managed to derail biblical theology from its original track of pursuing the *meaning* of biblical texts as the principle task of exegesis. It is not yet back on track though postmodern theory, at least indirectly, has the effect of moving it in that direction. Postmodernism does this by exposing the hubris of

historical critics who think that they have established the “facts” about biblical interpretation, at least in some provisional sense. Vanhoozer explains:

Postmodern critics have been quick to point out the naivete of modern biblical criticism’s alleged impartiality. While supposedly providing a ground on which people of different backgrounds and religious persuasions could meet and discuss on equal footing, historical criticism is in fact imperialistic and sexist. . . . Under the guise of neutrality, the historical-critical method in fact *dehumanized* the reader, requiring that all contextual factors and commitments be put off before the task of biblical interpretation could begin. Just as historical critics accused their premodern predecessors of imprisoning the text in the ecclesiastical straitjacket of dogmatic systems, so postmoderns accuse historical critics of imprisoning the text in the academic straitjacket of liberal-democratic European values (1998: 162).

Even where there is no direct influence of postmodern literary theory upon the methodology of biblical criticism, it has lost its authoritative edge among many scholars because they have concluded that the older method is simply inadequate for this postmodern era. This is why the Ratzinger Conference, a colloquium of Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars, gathered to see if they could use Method C to replace the historical method that has been dominant for so long. Method C, to which I have already referred, is a “post-historical” hermeneutical model that arose out of the work of narrative theologian George Lindbeck of the Yale School. It is a postmodern “community faith building hermeneutic” that de-emphasizes individual interpretation in favor of building a theological consensus on matters of faith among ecumenical interpretative communities (Lindbeck in Neuhaus 1989: 98-101). (This does not mean, however, that they plan to seek a consensus on other matters, such as ecclesiology or church polity.) The conclusion of the Ratzinger Conference is therefore indicative of a shift in hermeneutical thinking that has implications for the future of biblical studies. The participants

consummated their work with the determination that neither the historical-critical method nor fundamentalism holds the key to biblical exegesis. What is needed instead, they decided, is “a community building, faith transmitting hermeneutic. . . .” (Neuhaus 1989: 145).

Still, it is noteworthy that the participants did not call for a complete renunciation of historical criticism. Rather, they resolved that Method C would include that which is ‘extremely valuable’ in the historical critical method and that which is ‘extremely valuable’ in the great church exegesis of the Fathers (Neuhaus 1989: 147). This ambivalence on their part, however, stops them short of identifying with the most radical conclusions of postmodern literary theory and suggests that the conferees were looking for a place to *begin* in their journey away from the most objectionable features of historical criticism, not so much for a place to stop. In other words, their Method C is transitional in character. Nonetheless, the members of the conference have, at least, demonstrated their sensitivity to the loss of the solid Christian worldview that once characterized scholarship and culture. It is that loss which has contributed to the current crisis of belief in theology. How much, if anything, Method C contributes to the reestablishment of the Christian worldview remains to be seen.

In many ways the Ratzinger Conference was a postmodern convocation and what the conferees have accomplished has a two-fold application. First, they have concurred with one of the principal tenets of postmodern theory: “There is no pure, value neutral objectivity” (Neuhaus 1989: 145). Second, they have transformed the critical method from one that was atomistic in approach, that is, the technique of picking apart texts and leaving only the fragments of meaning (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 217), to one that is more “holistic” in character. This Quinean approach means that the “faith community” determines through in-depth study by various methods what is to be considered most significant and meaningful in the ancient biblical texts. In the judgment of the Ratzinger conferees, this would move the critical method away from its tendency to focus on what the text did *not* say to a more positive approach, one less confident in its “assured

results” of critical study, but more confident in a faith building hermeneutic.

For a faith building community hermeneutic to become widespread among biblical exegetes in the scholarly community, however, the break up that is in its incipient stages in the monolithic establishment of historical criticism must continue. This will not happen, of course, so long as historical critics insist on clinging to what postmoderns consider the outmoded rationalistic principles of the modern age. Moreover, since it is almost impossible to separate the historical critical method from its attachment to those principles there must somehow, at least, be a recognition that rationalism is not neutral or objective but “theory-laden.”

Modernity’s commitment to rationalism and the empirical method is clearly seen in the negative critical apparatus of the method, that is, in its tendency to rule out in advance anything that does not fit its rationalist criteria for truth. With modern criticism, “One no longer learns what the text says, but what it *should have said*. . . . [Accordingly, NLM] if ‘hermeneutics’ is ever to be convincing, the inner harmony of historical analysis and hermeneutical synthesis must first be found” (Ratzinger in Neuhaus 1989: 2, italics added). Ratzinger insists that the analysis, that is, the breaking down of the text into its component parts, no matter the critical method used, must not be allowed to destroy the unity of Scripture which is inherent in the text because of the work of the Holy Spirit in originally inspiring the words of Scripture (2 Peter 1: 20-21). The breaking down of the text, therefore, becomes destructive unless integrated with the classical hermeneutic method (Neuhaus 1989: 2).

All the above simply indicates that, with the collapse of modernity, there has been an epistemological shift in the focus of biblical criticism. For example, the so-called synchronic method, a contribution of postmodern literary criticism, is just beginning to take hold in some schools of theology. This method is “occupied with *the reading community and the effect of the text within it*. This is in contrast to the older diachronic method of biblical criticism. That method “traces the development [of a text NLM] through history . . . and is employed by various methods

such as source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism. Diachronic method has to do with what lies behind the text [not what lies in front of it_{NLM}]” (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 208, 210).

Thus, postmodern critics have been “disappointed and disillusioned’ with traditional historical-critical methods. Gulley writes that John Barton rightly notes that a major theme of structuralist approaches to biblical study has been a desire to undermine the results of conventional ‘historical criticism.’ Although these scholars do not defend biblical inspiration, they nonetheless have created greater credibility for it by their attack on the extreme rationalistic conclusions of historical criticism. Even before the full blown postmodernism that now prevails, structuralism had already moved biblical interpretation away from the author, contrary to the method of historical criticism, to a consideration of the meaning of the text. This does not mean that the author’s intent should be ignored but that what the text actually means should also receive due consideration. “Structuralism claims to be logical rather than historical. With structuralism there is a major paradigm shift in critical studies from the author-text diachronic focus to text-reader synchronic emphasis” (Gulley in Dockery 213).

These methods highlight the difference between historical and postmodern criticism and brings us to recent scholarship. “Whereas historical critics attempt to focus on the text at pre-canonical levels, canonical critics [those who use the synchronic method_{NLM}] approach the text *in its present form*” (Gulley in Dockery 995: 208). In other words, we best see the effect of postmodernism on historical criticism as a shift of hermeneutical perspectives. The text as it now exists, rather than how it might have been shaped by redactors, has become the focus. This is well represented in what some have called canonical criticism:

Canonical criticism belongs to what is called literary criticism in that it takes the text as it reads in its final form rather than being preoccupied with what may lie behind it. It, therefore, focuses on what the text means rather than what the text *meant*. It focuses on the present horizon rather than the past horizon. There is no interest in

authorial intention, or in getting back into the mind of the authors in a type of psychological study. Therefore, canonical criticism bypasses the gulf between the two horizons that has been the major concern of modern biblical scholarship (Gulley in Dockery 1995: 211).

The shift in horizons of interpretation is a major change in critical studies though the full effect of this is just now beginning to be felt in theological circles around the world. The challenge that postmodernism presents to historical criticism is that it insists that dependence on rationalism as a tool of exegesis be removed. "Postmodernity is less certain that there is any objective truth to be discovered. If all interpretation is culturally conditioned, reason itself may be nothing more than a tool of domination . . . and if an interpretation is merely one among many possible interpretations, it is pointless to argue for its unique worth or against the equal validity (or nonvalidity!) of another's interpretation" (Carson 1996: 20).

Another development of postmodern critical theory is the alignment of narrative theology with the so-called "new criticism." According to John Bowden, narrative theology is "an imprecise discipline, [that NLM] is concerned to relate the impressions made by narratives and the insights arising out of them to theological questions, and in particular to give substance to these insights and to suggest criteria by which they, and the stories which prompt them, may be judged to be true or false" (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 391). Narrative theology, then, is a reaction to what is considered the sterile exegesis of historical criticism. It is as much the child of postmodernism as historical criticism is the offspring of modernism. The new criticism, also known as "close reading" shows certain affinities with narrative theology.

Narrative theology is compatible with the approach of biblical scholars who interpret the Bible by means of 'close reading' methodology. Both give fundamental importance to the form and content of biblical narrative. Both are critical of the objectives of historical criticism in using Bible texts primarily to reconstruct the

history and religion of Israel, for fragmenting biblical texts into minute pieces, and for speculative reconstructions of the development of biblical books. Finally, both are opposed to the use of abstract reason to set forth the systematic rendering of biblical and theological ideas at the expense of ignoring the form and at times the content of biblical narrative (Perdue 1994: 240).

This is not to say that narrative theology is a replacement for the judicious and careful use of some of the better features of the method of historical criticism. After all, matters of historical background are and remain important for understanding narratives. By the same token, neither does the use of narrative negate the value of propositional statements in Scripture since propositions are the simplest and clearest means of communicating information. Though deprecated by some theologians, a careful analysis of the propositional statements in Scripture is still required for those would do serious exegetical work. The genre of narrative has its place in biblical exegesis because much of the biblical material is cast in narrative form. Yet, narrative alone is never enough. "Narratives do not ordinarily serve well when what is needed is close analysis of technical issues. Whether one is making the exegetical case for justification by faith alone, or describing the equations needed to figure fuel consumption for the space shuttle, the need for propositional statement and logical analysis asserts itself rather quickly" (Chapell 1996: 3).

More importantly, narrative is not enough because the Bible is more than narrative. Though Scripture contains much of the narrative genre in both Old and New Testaments, it is also rich in propositional content. Accordingly, one of the fine contributions of the older historical - grammatical approach to biblical studies is that it engages the propositional content of Scripture while not neglecting the importance of narrative. Therefore, this balance between propositional statements and other genres in the biblical text, such as narrative, must not be conceded to the methods of any critical biblical approach.

In fact, the genius of Scripture as it pertains to transferable meaning is that it weds

narrative and propositional forms to *lock down meanings across time and across individual and cultural differences*. In the Bible, narratives provide experiential reference for the meaning of propositions, even as propositions provide conceptual and linguistic backgrounds for the narratives that give their shapes meaning. The narratives would have no personally transcendent meaning without the propositions, and the propositions would have no personally transferable meaning without the experiential accounts that provide vicarious interaction with Scripture's truths. By providing narratives along with propositions the Bible asserts the value of both, and makes suspect any communication system that would deny the value of either (Chapell 1996: 12, italics added).

Chapell's remarkable assessment of narrative and proposition emphasizes the best of both postmodern literary theory and historical - grammatical studies. The Ratzinger Conference also tried to bridge the huge gap that exists between Christian communities and shows that the Christian worldview has common elements that unite both Catholics and Protestants. They would have done well, however, to have had Reformed scholars like Chapell (President of Covenant Theological Seminary) in attendance. Chapell demonstrates that it is possible to utilize the insights of other systems of thought in a positive manner even though, as is the case with postmodernism, that system is otherwise seriously flawed. Likewise, Thiselton's use of Gadamer's work in his book, *The Two Horizons* (1980), is a good example of how an effective use of some of the critical tools of postmodern literary theory in hermeneutics can advance Christian worldview hermeneutical concerns (Carson 1996: 120).

4.3.2. Using Postmodern Literary Critical Tools for Exegesis

Though I shall explore the ways that postmodern critical tools may assist the interpreter of biblical texts in his or her work of exegesis, this must not be construed to mean that I therefore have less regard for the use of the older hermeneutics such as that expressed in the grammatical-

historical method. After all, there is no substitute for the arduous labor required in determining the original meaning of a text with all the nuances and shades of meaning of its initial composition.

As I have indicated, a good place to begin with the use of postmodern tools of exegesis is what is called “horizon” hermeneutics. Although it seems new to many it is actually as old as Christianity itself. In fact, given the consistent way that New Testament Christology is linked to the prophecies of the Old Testament, it may be that horizon hermeneutics has always been part and parcel of Christianity. For example, the evangelist Luke presents the clearest passage in the New Testament of the use of two horizons. He relates the encounter of Jesus with two disciples who, while traveling to Emmaus right after the resurrection of Jesus had occurred, encountered a “stranger” who joined them in their journey. Luke tells us that the stranger was Jesus who “expounded unto them in all the Scriptures all the things concerning himself” (Luke 24: 27, KJV).

Thiselton provides the analysis:

It involves *placing* messiahship, and at the same time expounding his own sufferings in the context of Old Testament passages. Meaning depends on context. More specifically it involves establishing a relationship between *two* horizons. The disciples ‘understood’ the texts when the subject-matter could be viewed within their own frame of reference (1980: 17).

A horizon, in the context of hermeneutics, is a metaphor that represents “. . . the limits of thought dictated by a given viewpoint or perspective” (Thiselton: 1980: xix). Thiselton continues:

The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and the text, in such a way that the interpreter’s own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged. In one sense it is possible to speak, with Gadamer, of the goal of hermeneutics as a ‘fusion’ of horizons . . . [but NLM] the two horizons can never become identical; at best they remain separate but close . . . and there is always progress towards a fusion of horizons. The Bible can and does speak

today, in such a way as to correct, reshape, and enlarge the interpreter's own horizons (1980: xix).

Horizon interpretation, then, is not something recently discovered for use in the field of hermeneutics. It has always been present in interpretation even if not as refined or understood as it has been since the work of Husserl and Gadamer. More recently, we have indeed come to the understanding that

historical conditioning is two sided: the modern interpreter, no less than the text stands in a given historical context and tradition. . . The nature of the hermeneutical problem cannot be discussed today without reference to the two sets of contrasts which we have just described. . . . There must occur, then, an engagement between two sets of horizons (to use Gadamer's phrase), namely those of the ancient text and those of the modern reader or hearer (Thiselton 1980: 11-12, 15).

Thus far, however, and for that matter in all our previous discourse on hermeneutics, there is a missing dimension, that of the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, it is becoming more obvious as we proceed that without such aid the biblical interpreter is put at a distinct disadvantage. This is because interpretation is inadequate by itself to resolve the complexities of the problem of language. Still, the vast array of hermeneutical tools now available puts the contemporary exegete at an advantage not enjoyed by interpreters of previous generations if the proper connection is made with the Holy Spirit. We will consider the role of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics in chapter 6.

There is a sterile effect in hermeneutics when the interpreter assumes that arriving at the author's intention is a sufficient goal for exegesis. Recent literary theory has helped immensely in providing new insight into the place of the author in biblical studies. "It is certainly correct," as Gadamer puts it, "that we have to understand what the author intended 'in his sense.' But 'in his sense' does not mean 'as he himself intended it.' It means rather that understanding can also go

beyond the author's subjective act of meaning, and perhaps even necessarily and always goes beyond it" (1976: 122). Therefore, what the author may have intended and the full import of his text may not be one and the same thing. We have already seen that in the two horizon approach which Luke records in the Emmaus account. In that situation, Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament passages he used went well *beyond* what their authors likely intended although it is certainly important to establish the author's intent before one goes beyond it. Finding Christ in the Old Testament may not be possible, however, if the interpreter is content to find *only* the author's intent. Even in mundane studies, this is a valid principle. "It is obvious to us that understanding the historical significance of an action presupposes that we do not restrict ourselves to the subjective plans, intentions, and dispositions of the agents [authors NLM]" (Gadamer: 1976: 122).

Linge, Gadamer's translator, in his assessment of the impact of Gadamer on hermeneutics, gives the reason that Gadamer believed that the author's intent does not close the hermeneutical task:

The whole of being that is mirrored and disclosed in language – including the language of texts – gives interpretation its continuing task. The infinity of the unsaid that is essential to language cannot be reduced to propositions, that is, to the merely present-at-hand, for every new interpretation brings with it a new 'circle of the unexpressed.' Thus what is disclosed in language poses ever new questions to its interpreters and gives new answers to those who are challenged by it and play its meaning further within the dialectic of question and answer. Every conversation has an inner infinity and no end (Gadamer: 1976: xxxii-xxxiii).

One of the valuable lessons of the new hermeneutical approaches is the truth that all our interpretation is limited by our own finiteness. Unless the Spirit illumines the noetic faculty of our fallen natures we must hold every finding of our hermeneutical enterprise with unsteady reservation. We simply do not possess the ability to overcome the finite limitations of both our

own understanding and the limits of language. Therefore, only the future in God's kingdom will fully resolve our hermeneutical tangled webs of understanding. Perhaps this is why Gulley, in a review of the work of James C. McHann, adds a third horizon based on Pannenberg's view of eschatology. That third horizon is the future drawn back into the present as a framework for interpreting the text. We are told that Pannenberg argues that " 'only in the light of the finished product can there be real meaning.' " Building on that thought is a reference from Thiselton: " 'The future horizon is the time when we will know the meaning of the text after Christ's return' " (Dockery 1995: 208-209).

Some scholars believe that the contemporary church has lost its sense of community. This is especially true of Protestants because of their emphasis on the autonomy of individual interpretation as over against the official dogma of bishops and popes since the Reformation. But things are changing. For example, Stanley Grenz (1993: 13-17) is one who welcomes the recovery of an emphasis on community which is one of the benefits of the postmodern era. Heretofore, in the modern era, an extreme focus on individual rights and personal freedoms has tended to eclipse the importance of community as a stabilizing and nourishing influence for both culture and church. Moreover, the importance of community as the venue for worshiping God and interpreting Scripture is a legacy of the Reformed recovery of the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of believers. On the other hand, the church assembling as a collection of *individuals* rather than the *corporate body of Christ* negates a sense of community and results in an experience of isolation and loneliness for many who attend church. A return to an emphasis on community cohesion is therefore one of the salutary effects of postmodernism.

Postmodernists argue that "interpretative communities" determine the mores, morals, and values of the subgroups which make up the global cultural environment. In this multicultural context, homogenous culture, therefore, is considered to be a thing of the past. But is this true? Are there not yet homogenous cultures? One thinks of the Japanese as just one example and there

are others scattered throughout the world. But are not communities in the West also generally fragmented into an ever increasing number of interpretative subgroups due to the effects of pluralism? However this may be, the Christian understanding of community is much broader in that it includes the *whole* church for *all* time. This is because Christ has created one new humanity for himself in his redemptive work on the cross (Ephesians 2:15f).

Nevertheless, postmodernism's emphasis on community is welcome though it must be tempered with certain safeguards. For instance, the interpretative community of the Church is an important influence in keeping individual interpretation balanced and authentically Christian, thus serving as a safeguard against heresy. "All traditions tend to wander off in time. That is one of the reasons why constant checking and reformation are needed" (Carson 1996: 127). But as the Ratzinger Conference has demonstrated, Christians of differing denominational perspectives can find common ground for challenging the "wanderings off" of one another and do so in a spirit of candor, grace, and mutual respect. They do so, however, not by denying their differences but by affirming the central importance of classic Christian doctrines such as the authority of Scripture, the triune nature of God, and Christian ethics (as in the case of a common stance against abortion among Catholics and evangelicals), just to mention a few. Another safeguard is tradition. Christian communities transfer doctrine and practice to future generations thus giving stability to Christianity through the generations.

One of the most effective hermeneutical tools of literary criticism is the so-called "hermeneutical circle," a device based on Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and required in his thought as a function of reflection (Gadamer 1976: 39). The hermeneutical circle is defined as a technique of asking questions of the text and thus it constitutes an ongoing dialogue between the reader and the text.

- In pursuit of the meaning of any expression or text — a poem, narrative, parable, etc.
- we must begin with sufficient prior understanding of what the text is about in order

to enter into a dialogue with it in which our understanding is subsequently enlarged. We put questions to the text which are, in turn, reshaped by the text itself. This process has come to be called the 'hermeneutical circle' (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 249-250).

However, the process described by Richardson and Bowden must not be allowed to enforce an "anthropocentric perspective on interpretation [that NLM] makes human experience the measure of truth" (Thiselton 1980: 197). This is problematic because the idea of the hermeneutic circle grew out of the conviction that all interpretation is contingent, a legacy of Lessing's "ugly ditch." The expression itself (hermeneutical circle) was linked to the works of Ernst Fuchs and G. Eberling. For them it was a result of the inability of language to provide certainty thus it became "meaningless to talk about objective truth, objective interpretation" (Carson 1996: 70).

The circle, then, is based on subjectivism, the notion that interpretation is contingent upon a number of factors including the personal biases of the author and reader. It is understood from this that "the line of data is not a straight line from the knower to the text . . . what really takes place is better schematized as a circle, a hermeneutical circle: I approach the text today, the text makes its impact on me, I (slightly altered) approach the text again tomorrow, and receive its (slightly altered) impact, and so on, and so on, and so on. The so-called 'dual aspect' of hermeneutics focuses simultaneously on text and interpreter" (Carson 1996: 70).

But there is weakness in the analogy of a hermeneutical circle, the "new hermeneutic." It protests too much that there is no objective truth in the text and insists too much that it is all interpretation. Moreover, it blunts the effort of the author in his attempt to communicate because the effect on the reader is supposedly so ambiguous.

On this showing, the aim of the exercise *cannot* be the discovery of the objective truth as to what the text 'actually says': we simply do not have access to what it 'actually says.' For us there is no such thing; there is only *interpreted* 'truth.' The

aim of the exercise [the circle NLM], then, is not the discovery of objective truth, but *Sprachereignis* ('language event' to use Fuch's expression), or *Wortgeschehen* ('word-event' to follow Eberling) . . . 'The text . . . becomes a hermeneutical aid in the understanding of present experience.' . . . Certainly no tie is admitted to authorial intent other than through the text (Carson 1996: 72).

Supposedly the hermeneutical circle, at least as some interpret it, is to draw the interpreter closer to the meaning of the text, or at least to some meaning. As Gadamer saw it, the circle was necessary because the fusion of horizons is the interplay that occurs between the two horizons. We put our questions to the text. In turn our own self-understanding is affected by the text and reshaped by it. "A constant back and forth between our world and the world of the text moves us closer and closer to a 'fusion of horizons.'" (Allen 1985: 273).

As Osborne suggests, all this can more readily be seen as an asset when the interpreter converts Gadamer's circle into a "spiral." A spiral is a more *intensive* approach to a text for the reader than a circle in that it concentrates one's effort on arriving at a better understanding of the author's intent. However, this does not ensure that the reader will finally arrive at the *only* true interpretation of a particular document for texts do not, as a matter of structure, have boundaries that close in meaning and close off misunderstanding. The use of a spiral as a hermeneutical tool, on the other hand, *does* allow an interpreter to work with texts with some prospect of gaining deeper understanding than is the case with the endlessly deferred meaning of the hermeneutical circle. For Christian interpreters this is important since the object of Bible study for them is not merely an exercise in reading itself, or of gathering information for the sake of knowledge itself, but rather an effort to grow in understanding of the biblical revelation. Thus, the Christian approaches a biblical text with his questions and receives answers through diligent and intensive study of it. This does not mean, of course, that one will exhaust the meaning of a text, or receive answers from it for every question one has, but rather that one will make *progress* toward arriving

at meaning rather the endless *delay* of meaning. This makes Bible study an adventure for another day passes and there are yet perhaps more answers from the same text. This goes on for the Christian's entire lifetime for the only boundaries that he will find in the text, for that matter in any text, are those that will be placed there by the Lord himself in the third hermeneutical horizon of last things (the "then" of 1 Corinthians 13: 12). In a Hegelian sense, then, this means that texts are not exhausted of meaning short of that final revelation. Rather, they are capable of shedding new meaning and significance beyond the interpretation of any period. It also means that the meaning of a text is not identical with the intention or self-consciousness of its author but may have and take meaning beyond the author's intent or awareness (Allen 1985: 272-273).

The work of literary critics has, if we allow it, a way of humbling us. Their work, as flawed as it is in so many aspects, nevertheless reminds us that we are not perfect human beings. We do indeed sometimes use language as a means of exercising power over others. We do 'tell stories,' believe 'doctrines,' and hold 'philosophies' because they give us or our community power over others. Indeed, we *should suspect our motives* for believing what we do and practicing what we do. We are, after all, finite creatures, with fallen sinful natures. Yet, we are also accountable to God and responsible for exercising our human wills for good or ill. By the same token, however, so are the literary critics. What, then, is their will to power? What motivates them to believe the way they do? Why is their hermeneutic superior to anyone else's? The time has come to use "the hermeneutic of suspicion" on the writings of postmodern authors who, after all, produce texts that are "unstable" and "indeterminate" with "postponed meaning." Why then should we trust *their* position any more than *our own*? But before drawing conclusions about either position it is perhaps helpful that we explore a bit the environment of pluralism that has provided the intellectual ambiance for both Christianity and postmodernism.

4.4. Pluralism as a Stimulus for the Renewal of Christianity

Christians have often recoiled from pluralism when they should have responded to it. From its beginning, Christianity has been pluralistic, even multicultural (Fleming 1997: 43). That pluralism is a biblically accepted phenomenon is clearly shown in the fulfillment of eschatological expectations. “After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues, stood before the Lamb . . .” (Revelation 7: 9). Though much of Western Christianity is identified with white males and ethnocentric culture, the Christ that Christians follow was a dark skinned Jew as were most of his apostles and many of the early Church Fathers. His language was characteristic of the multiculturalism of his day for he spoke in Hebrew and Aramaic. The superscription placed on his cross by the Roman officials was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. Members of the early Church were composed of many different nationalities and tribes. Yet they all met together for common worship and service. One of the early deacons, a Greek named Phillip, preached the gospel in Samaria, an urban center of despised half-breeds and rejects of Judaism (Acts 8: 4-40). His mission there was interrupted by a divine call to the desert where he interpreted the gospel to a black man from Ethiopia, some of whose offspring would later become slaves in a free world.

The point, of course, is that the gospel was planted in the soil of multiculturalism, a condition of diverse racial, social, economic, and religious backgrounds. There were mystery religions, and various forms of the occult and animist religions that would pass for New Age religion in our generation. Christianity was not averse to multiculturalism; it flourished in it. It is even possible to use the “scandal of particularity” of the gospel in a positive way. Hendrik Kraemer, noted Dutch missiologist, believed so. “Kraemer’s uncompromising defense of the uniqueness of Christ still speaks to a pluralistic world” (Fleming 1997: 48).

Originally, Pluralism was a metaphysical theory in philosophy having to do with many

substances (substantial pluralism) as over against merely one substance (substantial monism). It later came to represent “the great diversity of views and their expressions.’” It is now understood “more generally . . . [as NLM] the state or condition of a larger social group in which members of a number of sub-groups — ethnic, racial, cultural, religious — maintain their many sub-group traditions and identities within the common culture of the larger group. So, for example, historians and social scientists now commonly speak of the religious pluralism typical of contemporary society in the Western world . . .” (Richardson and Bowden 1983).

In our generation, pluralism (in its ideological dimension), diversity, and multiculturalism have become problematic for Christianity. Yet, this is not what one would have expected given the pluralistic background of the Christian movement which is discussed above. How, then, did this come about? There are basically two reasons. First, Christianity, especially in its evangelical manifestations, has consistently retreated from engagement with the culture and withdrawn into enclaves of religious ghettoism. This is less so of the more liberal wing of Christianity though its engagement with the culture is generally limited to social problems rather than apologetics and evangelism. Second, the pluralism of our generation is different from that which existed in the times of the early development of the Church. That pluralism was socially based while contemporary pluralism is ideologically based. Vanhoozer concurs: “Pluralism is an ideology that sees mutually inconsistent interpretations as a good thing. I believe, on the contrary, that [ideological NLM] pluralism is a bad thing. . .” (1998: 418). It is bad so far as Vanhoozer is concerned because it encourages hermeneutic solipsism, that is, the self-centered reading of the text, the egocentric reading of radical-reader response that turns “‘whatever seems good in your own eyes’ into a legitimate hermeneutic principle. . . . When one interpretation is considered as good as another, readers . . . [do not NLM] ‘consider well’ ” (Vanhoozer 1998: 418).

Schubert Ogden has a slightly different view. A great number (some would say, increasing number) of theologians agree with his position. His position modifies Vanhoozer’s judgment

from “bad” to “problematic.” Here is his position:

Of the greatest importance for Christian theology is the religious and cultural pluralism that now exists or is deemed desirable within an emerging global society and culture. If the advocacy of such pluralism obviously challenges the exclusivist claims of much traditional Christian witness and theology, the sheer existence of so many different communities and traditions immeasurably complicates the theological task. In fact, the plurality of data that theological reflection must take into account in order to make good the truth-claim of the Christian witness is practically limitless. It comprises not only all the classic expressions of Christian faith in both religion and culture generally, but also all the more or less radical revisions of these expressions, including the modern secularistic humanisms both evolutionary and revolutionary, as well as all the other religions and ideologies, theistic and nontheistic, that are now known to belong to our common human legacy. To try to take account of so extensive a pluralism of both religions and cultures is to realize at once why any claim theology may make for the truth of the Christian witness is bound to be problematic (Richardson and Bowden 1983: 450).

This kind of pluralism has become popular in the culture. It is egalitarian in nature in that all perspectives, religions, philosophies, ideologies, are considered of equal worth or of equal value. It is a “plurality that is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished” (Carson 1996: 18). It is problematic for Christianity because of the prevailing attitude that “one religion is as good as another. None has the right to consider its views right or superior, or that other religions are wrong or inferior” (Carson 1996: 26). In this sense, pluralism is the great leveler of ideologies. This is the pluralism that is a challenge to Christianity. Here, we refer not to cultural pluralism but to ideological pluralism. The former is the result of the rich diversity with which God has blessed the creation and should therefore be celebrated. But the latter is the result of the fallenness of human nature which, in turn, led to the confusions of languages exhibited in the

disunity of Babel (Genesis 11: 8). The challenge facing Christians is how to make the Christian worldview make sense in such an environment.

That challenge is compounded because much of contemporary Christianity, as indicated in chapter 3, is a mirror image of the ideological pluralism of the world. Therefore, before Christian doctrine can reshape other worldviews, or even reestablish credibility for its own, Christianity must deal appropriately with the challenge of pluralism. However, rather than deal with that challenge, much of the contemporary Christianity has actually made peace with many of the tenets of ideological pluralism. Put another way, the Church's habitat, in the main, is in the world and since that world is increasingly being shaped by the perspective of postmodernism, the Church does not escape that influence, even though, in the view of many, it should. In other words, is the world to set the agenda for the Church or the Church for the world? Here we must allow the early Church to instruct the contemporary Church. The early Church found its habitat not in the world but *in the Word*. " 'Christianity is habitable,' says Cardinal Ratzinger, 'because they [Christians NLM] believe it [their habitation NLM] is founded on the Truth itself' " (Stallworth in Neuhaus 1989: 171).

But cultural pluralism is another thing. Christians, with certain qualifications, can and should embrace it. To do so is to respond to a challenging opportunity and a stimulus to renewal. Carson explains:

Indeed, in many respects believers can embrace pluralism more lavishly than secularists can. Our heavenly Father created a wonderfully diverse world: let us adore him for it. He makes each snowflake different; we make ice cubes. Quite clearly, God likes diversity in the color of the human skin – he has made people wonderfully diverse. Similarly, apart from wretched sinfulness endemic to all cultures, one must assume that God likes cultural diversity as well. In the realm of knowing, we join the experts of deconstruction and of the new hermeneutic in insisting on human finiteness; more, we

go further and insist on human sinfulness. The noetic effects of sin are so severe that we culpably distort the data brought to us by our senses to make it into self-serving grids. We are not only finite, on many fronts we are blind (1996: 98)

Yet Christianity, in the main, has not responded to pluralism in the way that Carson suggests. Instead, in America, there has been an accommodation to the spirit of ideological pluralism on the part of some evangelical preachers both in the churches and especially on the part of television evangelists. Market forces seem to motivate these ministers rather than the full biblical witness. We see it in the horizontal focus of their messages on the needs and problems of the people, whether it is an issue of diet, of physical health, of financial problems and desires, or of interpersonal problems. Of course, these are legitimate concerns but the television ministers seem to understand that such presentations are far more appreciated in a pluralistic culture than those that relate to vertical issues such as the holiness of God, the nature and attributes of God, and of truth that demands repentance. In one category there are those who articulate messages of human appeal and in the other category there are those who declare what the ideological culturalists might consider “truth with hard edges” (i. e., that which insists that contrary things are false), or that warns of the wrath [of God _{NLM}] to come. How far can such reconstruction [of the gospel _{NLM}] go before what is preached is no longer the gospel in any historical or biblical sense?” (Carson 1996: 30).

One of the greatest challenges that ideological pluralists has presented to the churches is the advocacy of tolerance. The idea of tolerance is one of the hallmarks of a noble culture and should characterize Christians above all. Unfortunately, the term has lost its original force and, in a pluralist culture, has come to mean something other than its original denotation. Originally, tolerance had to do with the acceptance of *persons* who were different from others in thought or deed. It is akin to the Christian virtue of “longsuffering,” an aspect of the grace of charity (I Corinthians 13: 4). In our postmodern pluralist culture, however, that virtue is lost. Instead,

tolerance has come to mean the acceptance of certain *ideas or behavior* no matter how repugnant or even outrageous they may be to others. For instance, if one is to be considered tolerant in an ideologically plural culture one must accept *the practice* of homosexuality as normal not just the person who engages in it. When Christians refuse to accept such behavior as normal they are often labeled “homophobic” and “insensitive” by the cultural left. This is true even though many churches have reached out to homosexuals in love and in ministry in the hope of helping them find deliverance through Christ.

The challenge for Christians in a pluralist culture is to love all persons, to receive all into the circle of that love through wholehearted acceptance, and to reach out to all races and backgrounds. Christians can celebrate diversity and pluralism because the best response to people who are different is love, to those who are in error, truth, and to those who are lost in sin and degradation, the message of redemption. There is a Scriptural mandate for doing so, a mandate that recognizes the rich diversity of the world which God has created. This is why Canon Warren of the Episcopal Church sees pluralism as an asset to Christian faith: “What a wonderful opportunity that religious pluralism offers to Christians and to everyone else to make a new discovery of Jesus Christ . . . (Fleming 1997: 56).

With postmodernism and the new paradigms of thought which it has fostered, we have indeed come to a time, as Canon Warren intimates, when the worldview of Christianity is receiving fresh consideration by many who had been formerly closed to it. By the same token, however, Christian thinkers have also had to reconsider their own ideological positions in the light of the peculiar insights and contributions of postmodern thought. Therefore, we turn next to some recent responses of Christian leaders who have found different ways of relating to the challenge of postmodernism.

Chapter 5

Christian Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism

5.1. Negative Responses

Walter Anderson in his book *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be* (1990) declares that postmodernism has created an upheaval that has divided people into two camps: the objectivists and the constructivists (1990: x). The objectivists “see the human mind as capable of more or less accurately, more or less impersonally, *mirroring* external nonhuman reality . . . on the other side, the constructivists hold that what we call the ‘real world’ is an ever changing social creation” (1990: x, italics added). He continues:

The constructivists . . . say we do not have a ‘God’s eye’ view of nonhuman reality, never have had, never will have. They say we live in a symbolic world, a social reality that many people construct together and yet experience as the objective ‘real world.’ And they also tell us the earth is not a *single* symbolic world, but rather a vast universe of ‘multiple realities,’ because different groups of people construct different stories, and because different languages embody different ways of life. So, according to the constructivist view, people may have not only different political opinions and religious beliefs, but different ideas of such basic matters as personal identity, time, and space (1990: xi).

Anderson has correctly defined the challenge of postmodernism as that which sets the symbolic constructivist against the objectivist realist. However, one must ask whether any of this is really new. It is not. It is a variation on an old argument about universals versus particulars that goes back in philosophical genre to the Nominalism of thinkers like Roscellinus (1050-1125), Peter of Abelard (1079-1142), and especially William of Ockham (1280-1349) who “believed that a universal is a *mere abstract concept in the mind*” (Geisler 1999: 43). In Nominalist thinking there

are no changeless essences; everything is particular or individual. Since there is therefore no basis for general ideas, words can tell us nothing about the existence of an objective reality. Thus, “objective reality” is an invention or projection of the human mind (Geisler 1999: 543). The difference in our new situation is that — unlike the environment of long ago when philosophers interacted only with one another and their students in their esoteric world of learned discourse — the postmodern rendition of this old philosophy has now found its way into the homes, schools, and businesses of everyday common people (Oden 1990: 44). Moreover, it has gone beyond the Nominalism of Ockham. Now it is rooted in ideas about language and cast in terms of poststructuralism, semantics, semiotics, and semiology.

Anderson sees himself as a “constructivist” (1990: x). His is therefore a postmodern ideological approach in which he modifies Nominalism by simply replacing *individual* constructs of universal ideas with *community* constructs of local idiosyncracies, thus concluding that the ‘real world’ is tailor-made to meet the perceived needs of particular communities. But not all approach postmodernism ideologically as does Anderson. Others, like David Wells, believe that the issue is not one that was produced by ideology but rather one that came about through historical development. Therefore, Wells sees modernity, and the postmodernity that follows it, primarily as a phenomenon of cultural change. This is because he believes that ideology does not create cultural change, it follows it. He reminds us that postmodernism began with architectural innovations not with philosophical ideas (1993: 63-64). It is the “social environment [which NLM] shapes consciousness and in turn produces a set of ideas that are matched to the environment” (1993: 63, n.8).

Oden, on the other hand, believes that the problem is basically theological, that is, that liberal theology accommodated itself to modernity and therefore, when modernity collapsed, there was left an ideological vacuum in the West that was later filled by default with postmodernism. Thus, the remedy is a return to classical theology (1990: 80-95). In any event, both Wells and Oden

concur that postmodernism does not stand on its own ideological legs. Rather, it is the logical extension of the extreme rationalism of modernity that has simply been renamed *post-modernity* (that is, it is not *anti-modernity*). Therefore, they are convinced that postmodernity will eventually collapse even as modernity has already collapsed. On the other hand, Christianity which has been around much longer, not only remains resilient but is very likely to outlast postmodernity just as it has modernity (Oden 1990: 35-36). We turn now to these two who have responded to postmodernism negatively.

5.1.1. No Substitute for Truth: David Wells

David Wells was a historian who taught church history before taking on the task of teaching theology (Erickson 1998: 23). Perhaps this is why his approach to postmodernity is filtered first through a thorough study of the historic development of modernity's contributions to postmodernity's character rather than a strictly ideological approach. He answers the question of why theology is disappearing in the culture by focusing on the historical changes that occur in the small town of Wenham, Massachusetts from the mid-nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century and later throughout other cities in America (Wells 1993: 14f).

In some ways, Wells sees postmodernism as an extension of the spiritual vacuity of modernity. Accordingly, there is a spiritual hunger in people for a reality that transcends the social constructs of this new environment. He points out that postmodernity, with its emphasis on constructivism, has not been able to satisfy the desire that persons have for experiences that transcend their own "created" meaning. How do postmoderns then say no to the spiritual emptiness that is pervasive in our culture? According to Wells, they do so by searching for it in all the wrong places. As evidence of this, he calls attention to the widespread public interest in being "touched by an angel," near death experiences, and New Age religions that feature "resonating" with dimensions of being far outside what passes for "normal" in time and space. Postmodernity, therefore, with its emphasis on creativity as over against discovery has disqualified itself from

speaking to this spiritual hunger (Wells 1998: 193-194). Thus, the situation created by modernity and sustained by postmodernity has created a world that is void of spiritual truth.

What shapes the modern [and postmodern_{NLM}] world is not powerful minds but powerful forces, not philosophy but urbanization, capitalism, and technology. As the older quest for truth has collapsed, intellectual life has increasingly become little more than a gloss on the processes of modernization. Intellectuals serve merely as mirrors, reflecting what is taking place in society. They are post-modern in the sense that they are often disillusioned with the emptiness of the old Enlightenment ideals, but they are entirely modern in that they reflect the values of impersonal processes of modernization (Wells 1993: 61).

Wells therefore maintains that postmodernity's emphasis on poiesis, that is, on creating one's own meaning for life is not replacing the old fashioned search for the meaning of spiritual reality, a reality that must be *discovered*. Therefore, in a sense, like the Athenians of old, postmoderns cannot experience a relationship with the true God (one not created by constructivists) because they simply do not know who that God is (Acts 17: 22 - 24). Nor are they likely to experience him until someone who speaks out of an objectivist framework of meaning (such as the Christian worldview) declares the truth about God to them. Wells calls this spiritual yearning that is so characteristic of the postmodern era the "inability of human nature to live comfortably in a world evacuated of meaning" (1998: 196). [On the other hand, of course, postmoderns argue that they are capable of *creating* meaning for *themselves* in such a world.]

In some ways, Wells thinks that postmodernity has simply extended the ethos of modernity. For example, he notices the parallels between Harry Emerson Fosdick, "the preacher of modernity" and Robert Schuller, "the preacher of postmodernity." Both, says Wells, have psychologized life. Fosdick believed that modernity had provided a platform for the more intelligent preaching of the Gospel because it moved the attention of his audiences away from medievalism with its

premodern fascination with things supernatural to the relevancy of the progressive optimism of the twentieth century (Wells 1993: 178). Schuller, on the other hand, *constructs* a new gospel for these postmodern days, a gospel not that of the old news that Christ is the sacrifice for our sins who died and rose again for our justification (Romans 4: 25) but a gospel of self-esteem. It is the gospel of American “can-do,” a gospel that encourages one to create his or her own meaning by acquiring whatever one wishes, better jobs, health, prestige, recognition by one’s peers, all of which and more, when acquired, builds up and enhances one’s self-esteem (Wells 1998: 200).

But Wells believes that this psychologizing of life by the eminent American preachers actually undercuts the identity of Christianity (especially evangelicalism) in three ways: 1) It assumes the perfectibility of human nature, an “assumption that is anathema to the Christian gospel,” 2) It “undermines the desire and capacity to think, without which theology is obviously impossible. The psychologizing process identifies access to reality with subjective experience rather than objective thought,” and 3) It “vitiates the theological agenda because it severs interest in the outside world.” This means that we are pursuing self at the price of culture. It is a narcissistic, solipsistic way of looking at life rather than the Christian way which puts service to others as the highest good (Wells 1993: 178-186).

Wells sees this corruption of the pulpit by modernity and postmodernity as symptomatic of the culture at large and a clear indication that Christianity needs reformation not just revival (1993: 301). Moreover, he cites the work of Witten whose research revealed a general diminution of preaching against sin in the pulpits of America as evidence for his conclusions [See Marsha G. Witten, “Preaching About Sin in Contemporary Protestantism” in *Theology Today* 50:2 (July 1993): 243-253]. Wells gives the following assessment of that work: “For preachers are caught between the secular assumption, now everywhere present in the churches, that the self can be crafted, developed, actualized, and the biblical notion that the self is corrupted, fragmented, and incapable of healing itself” (1998: 48).

The solution that Wells promotes for the dilemma which postmodernism poses for Christianity is not comprehensive. It amounts to a call for Christians to return to the norm of truth as an objective source of knowledge, the very thing that postmodernism rejects. He also calls for the Church to recover its moral fiber, to opt for virtues over values, and to return to a vision of the holiness of God (1993: 300-301). Of course, this is all commendable, as far as it goes, but a more comprehensive approach, one that engages the thinking of postmoderns by challenging *their* presuppositions, is wanting in Wells' work.

Erickson believes that Wells' problem is one of imbalance. He thinks that he is too long on analysis and too short on proposed solutions. He points out that Wells does not suggest solutions for the epistemological dilemmas posed by modernity and postmodernity until the last chapters of his books and then only in the last few pages (1998: 40). However, to be fair to Wells, he is not alone in being short on solutions. This is common to almost all of the current critiques of postmodernism.

Nevertheless, Wells has his own critique of the approaches of other Christian writers. He thinks that authors like Oden misunderstand postmodernity in that they approach it in "exclusively intellectual ways" and overlook "the enormously powerful social realities that have created a world in which Enlightenment humanism seems so plausible" (Wells 1994: 218). We move next to Oden's intellectual response to postmodernism.

5.1.2. Back to the Beginning: Thomas Oden

Oden believes that the postmodern age provides an opportunity for Christians to reconsider its rich heritage in the Patristics. For him there is no substitute for the theological wealth that era provided. He writes: "The agenda for theology at the end of the twentieth century, following the steady deterioration of a hundred years and the disaster of the last few decades, is to begin to prepare the postmodern Christian community for its third millennium by returning again to the careful study and respectful following of the central traditions of classical Christian exegesis"

(Oden 1990: 34).

Oden therefore says no to postmodernism. Instead, he claims that the way forward is actually the way backward. We will understand this better if we take a moment to examine Oden's life. Erickson informs us that there are "two Thomas Odens: the modern Oden and the postmodern Oden" (1998:43). In a way, then, Oden "is actually something of a parable of the theological changes" of recent decades.

Here is a man whose faith and theology have undergone a major transformation over the past two decades. He has described at considerable length his earlier views and his current theological stance. He has recounted his exposure to and involvement with a number of current ideas and causes during his student days and his early days as a professor, and describes this role as that of a 'movement theologian' (Erickson 1998: 43).

It is the later Oden whose response to postmodernism provides us with valuable insights into the value of a journey back to the Patristic period. Oden's status as a movement theologian has led him to reject postmodernity and modernity and for the same reason, that is, because both are centered on human measures of value rather than God's. For him, postmodernity is no improvement because it is "ultra-modernity," just modernity carried to its logical extreme (Oden in Dockery 1995: 26). Oden long ago gave up on modernity in his personal spiritual pilgrimage and embraced an agenda for theology that intentionally returns to classical orthodox Christianity. What he means by "classical orthodox Christianity" is that consensual core of beliefs that has been held by the majority of Christians throughout the world since the first century. He explains:

Christian orthodoxy is textually defined by the apostolic testimony, as a fulfillment commentary on the Hebrew Bible. . . in its ancient (paleo) sense [it is NLM] defined sacramentally by the baptismal formula (in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), liturgically by the eucharistic event, and confessionally by the baptismal

confession with its precisely remembered rule of faith as recalled in the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, and their subsequent consensual interpretations. . . Orthodoxy is that sustained tradition that has steadily centered the consenting church in the primordially received interpretation of the apostolic witness. It means thinking within the boundaries of the ancient church consensus about the *canonically received apostolic preaching* so as to contextually apply that tradition to ever emergent cultural situations (Oden in Dockery 1995: 398, italics added).

In a sense, then, Oden wishes to return to premodernity in a critical sense (not a pre-scientific sense). He therefore calls himself a “post-critical” theologian (Oden 1979: 3; 1990: 34). Moreover, he calls for all Christians to return to classical orthodox Christianity because, while it flourished in a premodern cultural environment, it nevertheless transcends all cultures and times in ethics, esthetics, and meaning (Oden 1979: 3).

Oden therefore considers classical orthodox Christianity far superior to the vapid modern and postmodern assumptions that now seem to control the thinking of the West. Thus, his view stands in stark contrast with the postmodern assumption that all views, ancient or contemporary, have equal value. According to Oden, this distorts one’s sense of fairness. He responds:

From the viewpoint of contemporary anticlassical assumptions about reality, it may seem that I am being unfair; yet, it is precisely *the fairness of modern assumptions* that I am placing in question. Modern assumptions about reality tend chronically to assume that what is important in civil discourse is merely the toleration of all assumptions, leading to a complete sense of relativism of moral norms, not imposing upon others one’s own opinions, with an infinite willingness to see all views as proximately truthful, open to all moral claims and behaviors, even to those that have been regarded as intrinsically evil in the Jewish and Christian traditions, like murder, adultery, and apostasy (1995: 24).

Oden calls himself a “paleo-orthodox” believer. “Paleo” means “old, seasoned” and it is used

by him to distinguish his position from neo-orthodoxy. From Oden's standpoint modernity and postmodernity can never satisfy the soul that longs for the deep things of God. [It should be pointed out, however, that such was never their intention. NLM] On the other hand, Oden also calls himself a postmodern orthodox person in the best sense of the word (1990: 77). But his use of the term "postmodern" does not mean that he has simply gone past modernity in order to make a "simplistic, sentimental return to premodern methods as if the achievements of modernity were to be circumvented or short-circuited" (Oden in Dockery 1995: 20).

However, Oden believes that Christians can and should celebrate the death of the *spirit of modernity*. They should return (if they have ever left) to the "classical spiritual disciplines: the diligent study of the Scriptures; earnest prayer; the mutual care of souls, and walking in the grace of holiness" (Oden in Dockery 1995: 22).

For Oden, going back to classical orthodox Christianity is going back to something solid and enduring. Moreover, he is confident that increasing numbers of those who have lived through the collapse of modernity and experienced the confusing plethora of choices offered by postmodernism are searching for something deeper, something that has stability and meaning.

The thrust of orthodox theological method is seen in its own statements about why the councils were convened: not to 'remove the ancient landmarks' but to 'remain steadfast in the testimonies and authority of the holy and approved fathers' (Third Council of Constantinople); to 'drive away the laughter of the heterodox' (Chalcedon); to 'unite the churches again and to bring the Synod of Chalcedon together with the three earlier, to universal acceptance.' 'We hold that faith which our Lord Jesus Christ, the true God, delivered to his holy apostles, and through them to the holy churches, and which they who after them were holy fathers and doctors, handed down to the people committed to them' (Second Council of Constantinople). The precise focus was on accurate transmission, not innovation (Oden 1990: 161).

Unlike Wells, Oden presses throughout his works for solutions to the ideological challenges of both modernity and postmodernity. After lamenting that Christian scholarship had lost much ground during the modern period because of its fascination with “the bone-dry valley in which Bultmann’s work had shepherded preaching” (though he expressed appreciation for some aspects of Bultmann’s work) Oden hailed a new day for Christian scholarship. Accordingly, he proposes the following:

The patristic stones the modern builders [modern thinkers NLM] rejected must now become the major blocks for rebuilding upon the Chief Cornerstone, the unique theandric person, Jesus Christ. The very apostolic teachers and classical exegetes that moderns have long assumed to be discredited have become indispensable postmodern, postcritical mentors. [This is because NLM] The best hypothesis for making systematic sense of the texts of apostolic testimony is the simple classic premise that Jesus is truly human and truly God in personal union (Oden 1990: 106).

There is no need to fight anything that is dead and modernity is dead, says Oden. Therefore, he insists, it is time to move on to the future, a future bright with hope. To those he calls “young fogeys,” Oden gives the following counsel: 1) “Center yourselves in the text of the primitive apostolic witness. Listen to Scripture *with* the historic church;” 2) “Avoid the chief temptation of the believer in the jaded liberal culture: to be too easily intimidated by a modern consciousness already desperately on the defensive [Stay away from theological fads NLM];” 3) Embrace “the aesthetic beauty of retrogression, not to the twentieth-century fundamentalism, not to American revivalism of the nineteenth-century, not to the eighteenth-century pietism, nor to the seventeenth-century Protestant orthodox scholasticism, or to sixteenth-century classic Reformation teaching, but to the future through the route of classic Christian exegesis of *the first five centuries*, the ancient ecumenical tradition to whom all Christians — Catholic, Protestant, and Liberal — have a right to appeal” (Oden in Dockery 1995: 406, italics added).

5.2. Positive Responses

Having briefly considered two theologians who have responded to postmodernism in the negative sense, we turn next to two others who have embraced certain aspects of postmodernism that they deem helpful for informing and even strengthening their commitment to Christianity. They demonstrate the value that redounds to those who are willing to be open to whatever insights may be gained from those whose positions are quite different from their own. After all, even in heresy a grain of truth is resident else there would have been no followers at all for that way of thinking.

The question of whether some of the ideas of postmodernism can be found to be supportive of Christian belief can therefore be answered in the affirmative by Christian scholars. Put another way, there are some common areas of agreement that make it possible for Christians to identify with postmoderns as allies in their common resistance against the most objectionable and unfounded features of modernity. Alvin Plantinga is one among an increasing number of others who have taken this position. He finds himself in agreement with certain ideas of postmodernism and thinks that Christians can forge a mutual alliance on certain issues because those issues are “entirely congenial” to Christian belief (Plantinga 2000: 423). He gives a few examples: 1) “Postmoderns typically reject classic foundationalism.” And so do a number of leading “spokespersons for Christian belief,” among them, “Abraham Kuyper, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff and, for that matter, in anticipatory fashion . . . Augustine, Calvin, and Edwards.” [Classic foundationalism holds that only certain propositions are basic, that is, self-evident or incorrigible. Therefore, in a nutshell, if one’s proposition is not self-evident neither is it believable. Of course, classic foundationalists do not believe that the proposition of God’s existence is self-evident. NLM]; 2) Postmoderns exhibit “strong sympathy and compassion for the poor and oppressed, the strong sense of outrage at some of the injustices our world displays . . . and the unmasking of prejudice, oppression and power-seeking masquerading as self-evident moral principle;” and 3) Postmoderns believe that,

“even in the best of us, our vision of what is right and wrong, true or false, is often clouded and covered over by self-interest” (Plantinga 2000: 423-424). [However, some postmoderns too easily see this fault in others rather than in themselves. NLM]

Plantinga has clearly demonstrated that the Christian worldview can be informed, at least marginally, by those who are otherwise ideologically in opposition to that view. There follow some Christian spokespersons who take that position, among them, Stanley Grenz and the authorial team of J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh.

5.2.1. Revisioning Theology in a Postmodern Age - Stanley Grenz

Stanley Grenz calls for a revisioning of evangelical theology in the wake of the postmodern movement. As an evangelical, Grenz wishes to retain the doctrinal authority of the gospel but he seeks commonality with some of the aspects of postmodernism. For example, in the matter of mimesis versus poesis, Grenz encourages evangelicals to move beyond mere “discovery” in propositional matters to a bold commitment to “creativity” in a “unique evangelical vision of spirituality” (Grenz 1993: 88, 51).

For Grenz, therefore, postmodernism serves as a means of exposing evangelicalism’s too heavy dependence on the intellectual motifs of modernity (1996: 161). He therefore welcomes some though certainly not all of the revolutionary insights of postmodern epistemology. He even gives credit to one of postmodernism’s most controversial literary techniques as the means by which modernity’s hegemony in the West was weakened and overthrown. “The immediate impulse for the dismantling of the Enlightenment project came from the rise of deconstruction as a literary theory, which influenced a new movement in philosophy” (Grenz in Dockery 1995: 92). Now, with the passing of modernity’s influence in the West, Grenz “urges evangelicals to take seriously the challenge of postmodernism and engage in a thorough “revisioning” of their theology in light of it” (Erickson 1998: 83). What Grenz means by revisioning is that evangelical churches should move beyond doctrine to the relational aspects of Christianity because these have much greater appeal

in a postmodern cultural environment. According to Grenz, then, evangelicals should not so much focus on the doctrines of Christianity (they are a given) as on the spiritual vision of the believing community (the Church). Therefore the task of theology must be redirected.

The contemporary situation demands that we as evangelicals not view theology merely as the restatement of a body of propositional truths, as important as doctrine is. Rather, theology is a practical discipline oriented primarily toward the believing community. . . this situation does not necessarily prevent theologians from raising the truth question. On the contrary, our participation in a faith community involves a basic commitment to a specific conceptual framework (Grenz 1993: 79).

This revisioning is needed, Grenz maintains, because the church of the twenty-first century will have to relate, in some fashion, to the changes that have been wrought in the culture by postmodernism. For instance, many have accepted, even if uncritically, the notion of postmodernism that there is no basis for universal truth claims. Thus, "Postmodern thinkers have given up the search for universal truth because they are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflicting interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds" (Grenz 1996: 163). This does not mean that Christians should capitulate to the anti-objectivistic principles of postmodernism anymore than they should have yielded to the rationalistic anti-metaphysical premises of modernity. Rather, Christians must simply acknowledge that they are in a new situation and be willing, at least, to become familiar with the new contours of postmodern thinking so that they can adopt new strategies for ministry and mission in the light of it. In other words, this means that they must give credence "to the contextual nature of theology. . . . Theological reflection always occurs within and for a specific historical context [such as postmodernism_{NLM}]. Consequently, all theological assertions are historically conditioned" (Grenz 1994: 8).

In this light, Grenz presents what he calls "the contours of a Postmodern Gospel." They are:

- 1) A Post-Individualistic Gospel: ". . . The community is essential in the process of knowing.

Individuals come to knowledge only by way of a cognitive framework mediated by the community in which they participate;” 2) A Post-Rationalistic Gospel: By this Grenz does not mean that the gospel is “anti-intellectual and must wholly abandon the gains of the Enlightenment.” Rather, this means that “our humanity does not consist solely in cognitive dimension. . . . And we must acknowledge that intellectual reflection and the scientific enterprise alone cannot put us in touch with every dimension of reality or lead us to discover every aspect of God’s truth.” We must therefore make room for the biblical concept of ‘mystery’ – “not as an irrational complement to the rational but as a reminder that the fundamental reality of God transcends human rationality;” 3) A Post-Dualistic Gospel: “It must draw courage from the postmodern critique of modern dualism to develop a biblical holism.” Thus, “the gospel we proclaim must speak to human beings in their entirety;” and 4) A Post-Noeticentric Gospel: This means that “our gospel must affirm that the goal of our existence encompasses more than just the accumulation of knowledge. We must declare that the purpose of correct doctrine is to serve the attainment of *wisdom*.” Therefore, “a post-noeticentric Christian gospel emphasizes the relevance of faith for every dimension of life. It refuses to allow commitment to Christ to remain merely an intellectual endeavor, a matter solely of assent to orthodox propositions. . . it must also take its lodging in the heart . . . To this end, a post-noeticentric gospel fosters a proper ordering of activism and quietism” (1996: 167-173).

Thus, with Grenz, a Christian postmodernist emphasis on spirituality in a faith building community has taken root. He explains:

The revisionist evangelical theology . . . views the theological task in a slightly different fashion. It conceives theology as reflection on the faith commitment of the believing community. This theology aims to construct a model of reality that is in keeping with the biblical message and the historic position of the faith community, and that can foster a truly evangelical spirituality that translates into ethical living in the social-historical context in which we are called to be the

people of God (1993: 87-88).

Erickson seems to approve of what Grenz is attempting to do especially in the renewed emphasis on community. He sees that Protestantism, along with the modernity that followed it, has given an inordinate emphasis to individualism. The resulting autonomy of the individual has fostered a climate in the church of fragmented *private* theology which, in some instances, has drifted far from the theology that has characterized Christianity through the centuries. Somehow, then, there must be a restoration of the balance between individual belief and the doctrines entrusted to the Christian community which is encompassed in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Erickson's critique of Grenz lauds the latter's insight on this point:

When one combines the influence of Western individualism with the natural inclination to independence of many in the Free church tradition, the priesthood of all believers becomes *transmuted* into the priesthood of each believer, which is a somewhat different matter. The latter turns out to be something like 'everyone is entitled to his own opinion,' which is quite different from what the Reformers had in mind in the doctrine of all believers (1998: 98, italics added).

Because of the unbalanced emphasis on individualism that has characterized Protestant Christianity, Grenz insists that one of the great contributions of postmodernism is its emphasis on the interpretative community. This is because "community is integral to the process of knowing" (Grenz in Dockery 1995: 98). He proposes a solution to the problem of an inordinate emphasis on individualism: "Instead of elevating the individual to the center, therefore, postmodern evangelicals must carve out a theology that integrates the human person *into* community, acknowledging as well the importance of the believing community and our presence within it to our knowledge of God" (Grenz in Dockery 1995: 99, italics added).

Grenz is one of the few evangelicals so far that has set forth a carefully thought out theology for this postmodern age. It remains to be seen how far the rest of the Christian community is

willing to go with him in this. For one thing, although Grenz carefully explains that he does not “discount the role of the Bible for the church or for the theologian” he makes a proposal that many evangelicals are probably not yet ready to embrace, if ever. In the light of the postmodern environment within which the church now finds itself, he proposes that “evangelical theologians ought to move away from conceiving their task as merely to discover divinely disclosed truth understood as the single, unified doctrinal system purportedly lodged within the pages of the Bible and waiting to be categorized and systematized [a long tradition in theology _{NLM}]” (1993: 88). Instead, he proposes that the church look to the more practical intent of living out the implications of the gospel in a postmodern context of community spirituality (1993: 88-108).

Erickson’s evaluation of Grenz’s postmodern theology includes a list of positives and negatives. As an example of a positive contribution, he cites Grenz’s appeal to evangelicals that they appropriate some of the insights of postmodernism for the Christian community. Because of this appeal, Erickson writes that Grenz “has shown the courage to be innovative, rather than merely to enunciate evangelical theology in the same familiar fashion. He seeks to be genuinely contemporary.” The negative for Erickson, however, is his concern for “how genuinely evangelical Grenz’s approach can be considered. This is certainly a somewhat different conception of evangelicalism than has usually been thought of. In fact, in some ways, such as its emphasis on narrative and the community, it seems to draw rather heavily on the postliberalism of someone like George Lindbeck” (Erickson 1998: 97, 101). Mohler agrees. He writes:

The truth question [for Grenz _{NLM}] is ill defined and therefore a step back from the assurance of truth found in the older propositionalism of evangelicalism . . . In the end, Grenz’s ‘revisioning’ of evangelical theology amounts to a total revision of the evangelical tradition. The doctrine of revelation, which has functioned as a foundational doctrine and the epistemological fulcrum for the evangelical task, is now shifted to an interior discussion *within* the theological system (Dockery 1995: 79-80, italics added).

While not doubting the sincerity of Grenz's effort to bridge the ideological gap between evangelicalism and postmodernism, I find myself agreeing with Mohler and Erickson. While I appreciate Grenz's effort to move evangelicalism toward an intelligent engagement with postmodernism, I also notice that his attempt to move it away from an emphasis on doctrine seems to have made him somewhat defensive. For example, he seems to find it necessary to keep insisting that he still holds to key evangelical distinctives. On the other hand, in his defense, Grenz explains why he takes what some may consider risky positions in his theology of postmodernism. "Postmodernism does pose dangers. Nevertheless, it would be ironic and tragic if evangelicals ended up being the last defenders of the now dying modernity" (Grenz in Dockery 1995: 101).

5.2.2. Deconstructing the Christian Metanarrative - Middleton and Walsh

Written on a popular rather than scholarly level, the books of J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh suggest that instead of allowing oneself to react to or resist the ideology of postmodernism, it would be more meaningful and productive for persons of faith to do "a *rereading* of the Bible in light of the concerns raised by postmodernity" (Erickson 1998: 104, italics added). The authors clearly demonstrate in their book *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (1995) that such a rereading can be an exercise in biblically informed radical thinking. This is because the "re-plowing" of the Scriptural landscape by the authors produces some surprising similarities between the biblical worldview and some of the tenets of postmodernism. The issue is indeed one of worldview, that is, of the conceptual framework for deciding what is real. A review of the tenets of postmodernism, however, reveals that they have taken the position that there is no universal criteria for reality. "Reality," for them, is simply a social construct.

Therefore, if the postmodern view of reality is correct, then the question becomes one of whether there is any justification for one worldview of reality (metanarrative) taking precedence over another. Why, for example, should the worldview of the modern myth of progress be considered superior to the simpler worldview values of third world countries? Or, why should

the Christian worldview with its claim to universal truth prevail over the diverse truth claims of multiple faith communities? Middleton and Walsh not only have listened to the positions put forward by postmodernists on these issues but they have sought to demonstrate that the message of the Bible, and especially the radical life and ministry of Jesus, had already anticipated many of them. Accordingly, the authors admit that the postmoderns are right in their claim that Christianity makes universal truth-claims and they invite other Christians to make the same confession:

First of all, we need to admit unabashedly that Christianity is rooted in a metanarrative that makes universal claims. This is another way of saying that the Scriptures disclose a *worldview* in storied form. It is difficult to see how one could take the biblical presentation of creation, fall and redemption as merely a local tale. Indeed, it is difficult to find a *grander* narrative, a more comprehensive story anywhere. Christianity is undeniably rooted in a grand narrative that claims to tell the true story of the world from creation to eschaton, from origin to consummation. So, we must admit that, yes, the Christian faith is rooted in a metanarrative of cosmic proportions. And we have no intention of giving this up and opting for a merely *local* story. That would not be the gospel (Middleton and Walsh in Phillips and Okholm 1995: 141-142).

Therefore, Middleton and Walsh take the position of siding with some of the concerns expressed by postmodernism. This they do even though they “believe that postmodernity, if taken seriously, constitutes an enormous challenge to the very foundations of a faith that claims to be biblical” (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 82). Nevertheless, without apparent trepidation, they agree with the observation of postmodernists that readers often tend to read their own biases, prejudices, and ideologies into texts. One should therefore *reread* the biblical texts with postmodern claims in mind in order to see if, indeed, the Bible is a totalizing text.

Middleton and Walsh have done that rereading and, having done so, they deny that Christianity is a totalizing faith, that it is just another oppressive Western institution. Having carefully reviewed the biblical message and looked for its positions vis-a-vis the poor, the downtrodden, and the oppressed, the authors conclude

that the Bible, as the normative, canonical founding Christian story, works ultimately *against* totalization. It is able to do this because it contains two identifiable counter-ideological dimensions or antitotalizing factors. . . . The first of these dimensions consists in a *radical sensitivity to suffering* that pervades the biblical narrative from the exodus to the cross. The second consists in the rooting of the story in *God's overarching creational intent* that delegitimizes any narrow, partisan use of the story. And these two dimensions, we submit, are intrinsic not only to the content, but also to the very structure of the canon ((Middleton and Walsh 1995: 87).

Thus, Middleton and Walsh insist that there is ample evidence in the words and actions of Jesus, and throughout the biblical text from Genesis to Revelation, to show that God is actually on the side of the oppressed and the disenfranchised. Accordingly, the authors maintain that Jesus pursued an *antitotalizing mission*. They insist on this because, in their view, Jesus tactically laid aside the holiness motif that had been so much a part of the Old Testament picture of God (in priestly provisions and prophetic preaching) and replaced it with "loving inclusion of the marginalized [which he demonstrated NLM] by befriending the outcasts of Jewish society" (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 102-103).

Postmodernists, we are continually reminded, take the side of the poor and the disenfranchised. But so did Jesus. He was sensitive to their sufferings and spoke gently to them in contrast to his scathing words of rebuke to the ruling power interests as represented by the religious authorities. The scribes and Pharisees had taught revenge and even hatred for the enemies of Israel. Jesus, on the other hand, advocated love for one's enemies and called attention

to the fact that God sent the rain upon the just *and the unjust alike* (Matthew 5: 43-45). Furthermore, the New Testament is replete with examples of Jesus' extension of mercy to those who were the rejects and outcasts of society because of their handicaps, ethnic identity, or diseases such as leprosy (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 104). Jesus even ate with tax collectors and was "the friend of sinners."

Moreover, Jesus was actually put to death because, at least on the human level, he was caught in a power vice between two forces, both of which were acting out of loyalty to their metanarratives, the political one of the Roman empire and the religious one of Judaism. The authors assert that

It is the Christian claim that Jesus paradigmatically embodied the central biblical trajectory of embracing marginality and pain — ultimately death — on behalf of *both* the margins and the center, thus bearing the sins of the world. This radical embrace was vivid testimony to his trust in the Creator of both center and margins, a Creator who is able to bring life even out of death. The person of Jesus, and especially his death on a cross, thus becomes in the New Testament a symbol of the counter-ideological intent of the biblical metanarrative and the paradigm or model of ethical human action, even in the face of massive injustice (1995: 104-105).

Because Jesus had taken sides with the disenfranchised, and those whom society had marginalized, was he therefore changing the original biblically informed metanarrative of Judaism? To the contrary, he revealed *the true contours of that metanarrative* which had been its nature before it was corrupted by the religious leaders. Thus, instead of being a totalizing metanarrative "the biblical metanarrative is one of . . . compassion and justice"(1995: 107).

But Middleton and Walsh are also critical of postmodernism. They point out that while totalization and violence against the disenfranchised is definitely objectionable, it is not the peculiar possession of Western religion, or colonial powers, but rather a characteristic of all societies, both East and West. They explain:

Take for example the present tribal violence and 'ethnic cleansing' in the Balkan states that was actually held in check by the political dominance of the Soviet Union with its modernist metanarrative of Marxist social engineering and universal class struggle. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, we now have the intensification of conflict between small states — and between ethnic communities *within* states each with its own local identity, agenda, and narrative (1995: 75-76).

Nonetheless, the authors maintain that Christians should not dismiss the concerns of postmodernists as just one more attack on the biblical metanarrative. They assert that postmodernists actually address some legitimate concerns that Christians should address as should others. Therefore, "in a postmodern context we need first to ask the Spirit to open our ears so that we can hear" (1995: 189). When we do this we will find that

Postmodernists are right: the voices of the marginalized, of those who have been left outside the story line that has been dominant in the West, need to be heard. . . . we need to hear anew not so we can appropriate these voices for our own agenda, nor to conspire toward some sort of God's eye view of the world, which would simply perpetuate the Bible error of autonomy. Rather, we need to be able to hear each other and the whole creation that we might join together in fulfilling the story of redemption (Middleton and Walsh 1995: 189-190).

Middleton and Walsh provide a needed corrective to the tendency of Christians to view all challenges to their faith as a call to rise up in a defensive posture against ideological opposition. However, their critique of the Christian response to postmodernism is not matched by an equally adequate critique of the considerable shortcomings of postmodernism, particularly its rather heavy dependence on radical literary theory, reader response hermeneutics, and its claim that texts are without inherent meaning.

Thus, with the wide range of Christian responses to postmodernism which the foregoing represent we find that it is possible to both incorporate some of the insights of postmodernists

and even establish new paradigms for the strengthening of Christian faith in a new intellectual environment. Therefore, we come to a fresh reconsideration of certain factors which make possible the reestablishing of the Christian worldview. These factors are those that relate to literary theory primarily because it is, after all, Western texts, including those of Christianity, that have been deconstructed by postmodern critics. Moreover, the logocentric metanarrative which is represented by biblical faith is so central to Christianity that its defenders are required to confront the efforts that others make at diminishing its significance, such as is the case with certain postmodern (and modern) exponents. Yet, this does not require the rejection of every postmodern insight. To the contrary, postmodern literary criticism has been helpful in prodding Christian scholars to take another look at how biblical texts are to be read and interpreted. For instance, the insights of Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Fuchs and Eberling, and even Derrida and Foucault, have led some Christian scholars to a renewed confidence in the Christian worldview especially when those insights are applied in a more responsible way of reading, acting out the implications of Christian faith (ethics), and in recovering the grand narrative of Christianity. We turn now to a review of the factors involved in reestablishing a Christian worldview.

No longer, then, does the postmodern reader encounter the text in a way that has the potential for changing his or her way of thinking. Instead, the exercise of reading itself may actually preclude any such life changing impact on the reader since he or she tends to be deterred from such an effect by the process of engaging in the endless play of word games and/or by the process of deconstructing the text. At least, this is likely to be the case because such a reader may have been denied — perhaps may even have lost — the influence that such a text might have had on his or her thoughts. The word games with which the reader is engaged may be considered preliminary (and thus arguably necessary) to a hermeneutical breakthrough for existential meaning as Derrida maintains (1978: 278-293). But if, as is the case with postmodern hermeneutics, one finds that the text has no inherent objective meaning, that the author's intent is not to be trusted, and that the only meaning the text can have is that which is given it by the reader, what then, after all, is the advantage of reading? Moreover, is this in any way a *responsible* way to read? Aside from these concerns, there is an even deeper problem that appears when the author is exiled to the hinterlands of obscurity. Hirsch states the matter quite succinctly in his reaction to the work of postmodern literary criticism. He writes:

Whenever meaning is attached to a sequence of words it is impossible to escape the author. Thus, when critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place, and this led unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusions. Where before there had been one author, there now arose a multiplicity of them, each carrying as much authority as the next. To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation. On the other hand, it might be the case that there does not exist a viable normative ideal that governs the interpretation of texts. This would follow if any of the various arguments brought against the author were to hold. For if the meaning of a text is not the author's, then no interpretation can

possibly correspond to *the* meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning (1967: 5-6).

One assumes, however, that the authors of postmodern literary theory do wish to have their own texts taken seriously, that is, that the reader should approach *their* texts with at least a modicum of respect for the author's intent. But how is this to occur given the postmodern proposition that the author's intent is either of no consequence to the hermeneutical process (the structuralist argument) or a hindrance to meaning for those who read against the text (the poststructuralist argument)? Is such a proposition permitted to extend to their own writings or just the texts of Western civilization? Moreover, if *all* texts are indeterminate for the discovery of meaning how do the texts of postmodern writers escape the same fate? In the light of such questions, one wonders how such ideas as are put forth by postmodernists should even be seriously considered by others. After all, it has long been known that serious reading is an active engagement between the mind of the reader and the content of the text and that one may only profit from the reading experience when one has come to grips on some level, whether in an elementary or profound way, with the author's thought (Adler and Van Doren 1972: 4, 46-48). Therefore, it remains true, at least for readers other than postmodernists, that "it is the author's intended meaning that is paramount . . . We cannot transform the context crossculturally until we have determined first of all its meaning in its original context. This becomes the basis for the dynamic transference of that meaning in its original context" (Osborne 1991: 92).

Responsible Reading, therefore, provides a different platform for meaning than that of Reader Response though, at first, these terms may appear only a matter of syntactical rearrangement (*reader* response to *responsible* reading). Reader *response* emphasizes the idea that meaning is ultimately produced by the reader rather than being inherent in the text, while *responsible* reading assumes that the text, when properly and adequately interpreted, will yield at least some of the meaning originally intended by the author and that is an *essential first step* for

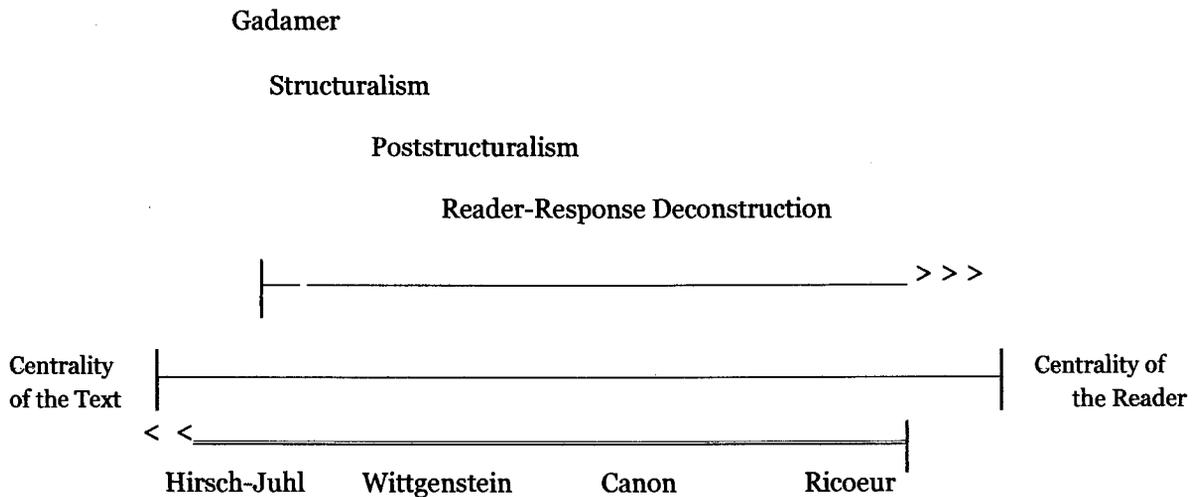
serious reading. It must be conceded in this approach, however, that such does not represent all the meaning that is resident in the text. There is meaning beyond the literal meaning, that is, the text can mean *more* than the author intended, though not less. Such is the case with those texts of Scripture which serve as typological references to Christ or the metaphorical allusions of parables and similes. It can be argued, nevertheless, that such meanings are covered under the qualification of proper and adequate interpretation.

Moreover, responsible reading requires an appreciation, even if somewhat reluctantly, for the prodigious work and carefully fashioned contributions of literary theorists. This follows because the various schools of that discipline have, after all, enhanced our understanding of language study through their elaboration of the place that the author, the structure of the text, and reader-response have in the minds of interpreters. Accordingly, the goal of responsible reading is to actually *arrive* at meaning (rather than the deferral of meaning) and this is not likely to happen without careful consideration of the effect that the author and reader respectively have on particular texts. In recent years, however, the greater emphasis has been placed on the response of the reader to the text, though in postmodern terms it is probably more accurate to speak of the reader's *reaction* to the text, rather than his or her *response*. Some, among them Hirsh, have argued for the validity of the text while others — one thinks of Ricoeur — have argued that the reader's response is the major factor in arriving at meaning. In the one case the text is paramount in importance, in the other, the reader is most important.

Thus, the task of arriving at the meaning of a text, though not always arduous, seems to require, at least, that the reader alternate between the text and himself or herself in arriving at the author's meaning. For some, how this task is executed may depend on which school of literary theory they may find most appealing. For others, especially those who would read responsibly, nothing more is required than cognizance of these developments and openness to whatever tools of postmodern literary theory, or any other theory, may be employed to help the reader arrive at

the meaning of the text.

By way of review, Osborne (1991: 396) provides the following chart which helps us plot the movement in postmodern literary theory away from the author and toward the reader:



In the case of each of the authors in Osborne's chart there is a claim that the approach taken will enable the reader to arrive at the proper meaning of the words used in a particular piece of literature or speech. But what, after all, is meaning? Meaning, writes Hirsch, is an affair of "consciousness" not of words. "Whenever meaning is connected to words, *a person* is making the connection, and the particular meanings he lends to them are never the only legitimate ones under the norm and conventions of his language" (Hirsch 1967: 4, italics added).

Postmodernists, as we have seen, have chosen to reject the author's intent in a particular text because they do not trust his or her motives. Therefore, diligently applying the hermeneutic of suspicion and deconstructing the author's text, they propose to expose and evaluate the alleged concealment of his or her will to power. Having done this, these critics then move on to the play or interaction that occurs between words in a given text which, following Wittgenstein, they have characterized as "language games." Notwithstanding the radical nature of their hermeneutics, however, we may nonetheless give postmodern literary theorists their due. They have performed

a valuable service for all in pointing out that authors *do indeed* bring their presuppositions, biases, prejudices, and even propaganda to bear in their writings. Seldom are their motives pure or their approach to the “facts” disinterested. Moreover, much of what they put on paper does, wittingly or unwittingly, reflect the influence of countless others (mentors, teachers) who have molded their thinking (resulting in intertextuality). Such a perspective, which is not at all at variance with biblical teaching on the sinful fallen nature of humanity, is plausible and even helpful thus assisting readers in their approach to the critical study of texts.

However, what postmodernists have ignored in their approach to literature is that not *all* authors mimic those who have influenced them. Certainly Nietzsche, who is the father of much of their *avant garde* ideology, had rejected a great deal of what he was taught by his culture and struck out boldly in new ways of conception that were both original and thought provoking. In fact, some authors and leaders are highly original geniuses who forge new paths into epistemological places none have been before. One thinks of the work of Einstein as an example. Others, like Moses and Paul, are seized by intense visions that have no spiritual parallel so far discovered elsewhere in all of literature and certainly Jesus is the most original of all. They seem to speak or write not out of motives of building power for their particular positions but out of a sincere desire to impart truth to others. Some of them allege that they have a word from the Lord and have witnessed his mighty power in their lives. Accordingly, they seek to communicate to others the things they have heard and seen. They claim to be witnesses to truth *not constructors or creators* of it as postmodernists would have it.

An example of a literary composition that is committed to the revelation of truth rather than the establishment of control over the thinking of others is the work of Paul as recorded in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians (verses 1-13). The language he uses in that text is hardly the language of power. He seems to be an advocate of no culture as superior to another in preference. There is nothing of patriarchal dominance in it. There is not a hint of oppression, suppression, or

manipulation in it. It is totalizing, however, in its claim that nothing is superior to love or charity (Verse 13). In the most gentle and gracious way, then, Paul is an advocate of love (agape). It is certainly worth finding the author's *intent* in such a word or words that relate to it. A responsible reader who approaches that text will need to trust the author if he or she is to discover what is meant by his words. Silva, in another context — that of language structure — insists that this, if nothing else, justifies all the effort that goes into literary analysis. He explains:

What was Paul trying to do when he used a particular conjunction or when he grouped together a specific string of sentences? Another way of phrasing the question is quite simply, What did Paul mean? The functional concern that characterizes discourse analysis is therefore inseparable from semantics. The inverse is also true: semantics is inseparable from discourse — meaning cannot be discovered apart from context (Silva: 1990: 123-124).

While what an author means to convey in his text has long been out of favor with most literary critics (Hirsh 1967: 1-3), the work of literary theorists has made us aware that what a text means is still a very complex conundrum (Ricoeur 1974: 86-95). This complexity relates to how words are used in speech and writing to produce meaning — to matters of the relationship of words to other words — to syntax and context, to the inflection of words when they were originally spoken, to etymology, and even typology (that is, projected meanings that are prescient, that go *beyond* the immediate or primary meanings of particular words).

While all the above and more is representative of the work of literary theorists, the issue of textual meaning still remains. Even though the text retains a life of its own, producing meaning long after the work of the author is finished, the meaning of the text cannot be separated from the author's intent. Responsible reading is not *creative* reading, that is, the responsible reader does not create a meaning for himself or herself that replaces or is considered preferable (even superior) to the author's meaning. Some reader response critics, however, while accepting the

differance (Derrida's term meaning how signs differ from one another and *defer presence*) resident in semiotics, nevertheless maintain that textual meaning has significance for the reader's present reality. They take a different approach, one that puts the reader in direct contact with the text itself in an existentialist way, thus allowing him or her to get beyond the author's intent so that the reader experiences the text in ways that are meaningful for him or her.

The task of interpretation, when applied to a specific text, is not 'to understand its author better than he understands himself,' according to a phrase which goes back to Schleiermacher. Rather, the task is to submit oneself to what the text says, to what it intends, and to what it means. . . . The moment of exegesis is not that of existential decision but that of [existential NLM] 'meaning,' which . . . is an objective and even an 'ideal' moment . . . Two thresholds of understanding then must be distinguished, the threshold of 'meaning,' which is what I have just described, and that of 'signification,' which is the moment when the reader grasps the meaning, the moment when the meaning is actualized in existence. The entire route of comprehension goes from the ideality of meaning to existential signification (Ricoeur 1980: 67-68).

It is because Ricoeur and others of like mind seem bent on elevating the text above the author in significance that they have chosen genre study over historical exegesis and analysis as a means of arriving at comprehension of meaning. Accordingly, there has been strong interest in narrative studies, in part due to "the failure of form and redaction criticism to interpret the text. . . . Narrative studies recognize that meaning is found in a text *as a whole rather than in isolated segments*, and so narrative criticism has become 'the new kid on the block' " (Osborne 1991: 153, italics added). The downside of this approach, of course, is that the author is often ignored along with the historical elements that serve as background for texts, including narrative texts.

In what follows, as a means of laying the groundwork for reestablishing a Christian worldview, I shall treat the text and its meaning as inseparable from the intent of the author, the

only exception being that noted above as respects typology (which, however, still does no violence to the author's intention). I do so not only because this is a necessary first step in hermeneutics but because giving up the priority of authorial intent surrenders too much to radical postmodern literary criticism. Furthermore, since discovering the meaning of the biblical text requires an understanding of the author's intent, the loss of either (textual meaning or author's intent) would leave the interpretative community of Christianity without credibility in a postmodern age. This is more than postmodernism should expect or require since it gives equal status to *all* interpretative communities. However, the reestablishment of the Christian worldview as a credible interpretative framework must not be done in intellectual isolation from other ideologies, but in the full open view of the competing truth claims of a pluralistic culture. In this sense it does not differ from the challenge that faced Christians in the pluralistic context of the first century, and it should therefore be a task entered upon with alacrity and boldness.

Therefore, the challenge of building a credible interpretative framework (worldview) in a postmodern age for Christianity (or any other worldview for that matter) requires first of all a responsible reading of texts. What I mean by responsible reading is that one reads *with the text* as a prerequisite for understanding it. This does not mean that one will not later read *against* it if that seems warranted by one's discovery that it is inaccurate, unfounded in its conclusions, or a piece of propaganda. In such cases it would be irresponsible to read *with that text*. Nevertheless, as a general hermeneutical principle, responsible reading will proceed in the following way: First, the reader must transparently trust the text; Second, he or she must engage its premises by giving it full and careful attention; and Third, he or she must seek to understand it through the use of proper exegesis (rather than eisegesis).

6.1.1. Trusting the Text: Augustinian Hermeneutics

There is a stubbornness in the human spirit that is inclined to believe only those things that are validated by empirical evidence. Anything not so confirmed is either considered fanciful or

nonsense. This is a compelling reason why the central message of the Christian gospel, the redemption of sinful humanity through the atonement of Christ's death and resurrection, is considered nonsense to the secular mind. Human beings have sinned against holy God? How can reason perceive that? What does human logic have to do with the cross of Christ or his resurrection from the dead? "There meets us in the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus the stumbling block of his cross. This stumbling-block has always to be overcome anew, and therefore it keeps reappearing. In actual fact our reason refuses to believe things that cannot be conceived [*a posteriori* NLM]" (Fuchs in Braaten and Jenson 1995: 140).

The mind of the postmodern reader has been trained to read *against* the text employing a hermeneutic of suspicion as he or she does so. In general, postmoderns believe that this approach to literature is justified because texts have sometimes, and in certain contexts, functioned as tools of institutional ideological oppression. Christians, on the other hand, have generally been taught to respect texts, especially biblical texts, because they are the instruments of instruction (e.g., catechism classes, Bible study, conferences, etc.) This is why Augustinian hermeneutics, which emphasizes the importance of reading *with* the text, becomes so important.

Even language itself, spoken or written, implies that trust-response is expected. For example, if in a crowded theater someone shouts the single word "fire!" many would immediately start for the exits without a moment's hesitation. While they may not *know* whether there is an actual fire, they know what the word "fire!" *means* and deem it the better part of wisdom to assume that the threat is real. The only appropriate response, then, is to act on what they have heard by immediately getting out of the building. A hermeneutics of suspicion, in such a circumstance, would have simply been misplaced. While I assume that the proponents of the hermeneutic of suspicion mean to apply their method only upon the texts of Western civilization rather than on simple speech acts as represented by my example, nevertheless, the principle that humans *inherently trust language* is demonstrably valid. Habermas is a philosopher who believes that

such speech acts (as that typified by the shout of “fire!” in a crowded room) uncovers the rationality that is present in all communicative action. “. . . communicative action designates a type of interaction that is coordinated through speech acts . . .” (Habermas 1984: 8, 101).

The fact is that no one can understand *any* proposition without first believing it. A proposition inherently represents, at least in the mind of the proponent, a credible reality. When reading any text the reader (even a postmodern one) typically assumes that the author wishes what he or she has written to be taken seriously, that is, to be accepted, at face value, as credible. This does not mean that the reader is to suspend his or her critical faculties or that he or she accepts the premises or conclusions of a particular author as necessarily valid. It *does* mean that the reader assumes that the author’s writings reflect his or her genuine beliefs, and that they are therefore worthy of fair and respectful consideration (See Mavrodes in Plantinga and Wolterstorff 1983: 98 for his treatment of this issue). But belief is one thing and knowledge another. If one believes something that is *not* true one’s need for knowledge is not served thereby. For instance, one may *believe* that the power of gravity does not exist but he cannot *know* such a thing because it is not possible to exist in the cosmos without being under the influence of gravity’s control. Thus, “knowledge implies truth whereas belief does not” (Hoitenga 1991: 4-5). Yet, belief can give way to knowledge. If one *knows*, for example, that Earth is a sphere one also *believes it*.

The hermeneutics of Augustine builds on this understanding of belief and knowledge. Moreover, his theology anticipated that of the Reformers as well. It is documented that both Augustine and the Reformers assumed the immediacy of the knowledge of God. They saw faith as a gift from God to all humanity.

Both Augustine and Calvin teach that there is an universal, immediate, non-referential knowledge of God in human beings, whether that knowledge is accompanied by Christian faith or not. . . . Their theory of knowledge is thus a combination of Plato’s approach to knowledge in the *Republic*, which defines

knowledge as direct acquaintance with an object and his approach to belief in the *Meno*, which illustrates it as accepting a proposition on testimony (Hoitenga 1991: 175).

Augustine taught that language deserves respectful response, especially the language of Scripture. Thus, trusting that the author of a text has written something worth considering is more than the playing of games with words. It is a dynamic event. Accordingly, Fuchs insists that language is something that happens; it is an activity and thus a situation. In a sense, following Fuchs, one cannot separate deeds from words. For instance, he describes the proclamation of Jesus to his disciples and to the crowds as a “language event.” This is because “every speaking” has a context, that is, it exists within a concrete *situation*.

Language therefore is never solely the expression of single conceptions but is always at the same time the expression of a decision . . . For in language I do not remain self-contained as I do in thinking. In language I expose those conceptions which I have unified to the agreement or contradiction of others . . . situation is the essence of the ‘language event.’ There is power in a language. Therefore it is an event (Fuchs in Braaten and Jensen 1995: 141-143).

The idea of language as event supports the hermeneutic of Augustine quite well. For him, language indeed had the power to change lives. It was thus that he taught that language — especially the language of Scripture — deserves respectful trust. The confidence that one places in language, then, is more than an exercise of the playing of word games in order to qualify context and meaning; language actually has the ability to bring about profound changes in the listener and in the reader. For Augustine, there can be little doubt that this understanding of the power of language derived from his conversion experience in a garden. He writes that when he was longing for God to reveal himself he did not look inside himself for a mystical experience but sought an encounter with God in which he literally begged him to show up in his life. He had fallen into a prostrate position under a fig tree in a garden and was weeping and praying. He wept, he writes,

over his sinful state and shameful past. As he was weeping, he heard the voice of a small child “singing over and over again, ‘pick it up and read, pick it up and read.’” Augustine took this as a divine command to open the Bible and “read the first passage I happened upon.” A Bible laying open on a bench was turned to the words of the apostle Paul. He picked it up and read the words: “. . . not in dissipation and drunkenness, in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires’” (Romans 13: 13-14). Later, Augustine described his conversion as the “light of certainty [which NLM] flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away” (Augustine 1997: 206-207).

Out of his conversion, then, Augustine’s hermeneutic of trust likely came. It all begins, therefore, with the authority of God. Augustine explains:

In the order of nature it holds that when we learn anything, authority precedes reasoning. . . . Authority demands of us faith, and prepares man for reason. Reason leads to perception and cognition, although authority also does not leave reason wholly out of sight, when the question of who may be believed is being considered. And certainly the supreme form of Authority is that of Truth known and manifest (Przywara 1970: 55).

For Augustine the understanding of human beings is clouded by the effects of original sin but this does not mean that they must walk in darkness. Rather, they are called to faith for faith dispels the clouds that cover truth so that the soul, by faith, may be suffused with the clear light of divine revelation. “If a man says to me, I would understand in order that I may believe, I answer, believe that you may understand . . .” (Augustine in Przywara 1970: 53-54).

Over and over again, Augustine returns to the thought that trusting the text is necessary if one is to understand it. “First believe, then understand is a theme that recurs throughout Augustine’s writings” (Nash 1969: 29). Therefore, if one is to have any hope of knowing God, one must first approach him through faith.

Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand. . . . We believed that we might know; for if we wished first to know and then to believe, we should not be able either to know or believe. . . . Faith gives the understanding access to these things; unbelief closes the door on them (Augustine in Przywara 1970: 58, 65).

Augustine had not always taken that position. He had earlier been influenced by a Christian heresy known as Manichaenism. It is widely known that Augustine first began moving away from the influence of the Manichaeans on his thinking when he came under the influence of Plato. While the philosophy of Plato certainly helped shaped Augustine's intellectual development, however, it is generally understood that the greatest influence on his thinking was his devotion to the Scriptures, the work of prophets and apostles. He returned again and again to his Latin understanding of the Septuagint rendering of Isaiah 7: 9 as is made clear in this passage:

For some kinds of things are those which we do not believe, save we understand them; and other kinds of things are those which we do not understand, save we believe them. For since 'faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' (Rom. 10: 17), how can one believe him who preaches the faith, if he — to say nothing of other points — understands not the very tongue which he speaks? But unless, on the other hand, there were some things which we cannot understand, unless we believe them first, the prophet would not say, 'If you will not believe, you shall not understand' (*Enarratio in Psalmum 118, 18, 3*; Przywara 1970: 59).

Augustine, in his insistence that placing trust in the content of the biblical text prepares the reader for understanding it, reinforces the notion that Christianity (and Israel's faith earlier) depends for its very life on appropriating and obeying the Word of God. These are responses, however, that are not possible without first *trusting and understanding* the proclamation of the prophets and apostles or, with their passing, the preservation of those proclamations in biblical texts. Because this is so, Christianity cannot ignore or be indifferent to the propositions of

postmodern thought. Failure to confront and challenge such propositions (i.e., the irrelevancy of the author's intent and the indeterminacy of textual meaning, among others) leaves Christianity vulnerable to the threat of irrelevancy or even extinction, prospects hardly acceptable to millions of Christians around the world.

6.1.2. Engaging the Text: Gadamer's "Fusion" and Osborne's "Spiral"

Trusting the text prepares the reader for more serious and responsible engagement with it. Engagement with the text, in some ways, has been helped along by the work of postmodern literary critics whose salutary effect upon hermeneutics is that they have provided new tools for effective and responsible reading. One thinks especially of Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and Osborne's more evangelical variation of that method. While most postmodern critics have used the hermeneutical circle which had earlier been developed by Schleiermacher to endlessly postpone meaning, Thiselton has shown that, with Gadamer's work, one need not do so. Instead, the interpreter may infuse his understanding with that of the biblical text thereby provoking personal transformation which is, of course, one of the purposes of effective Bible study. Following Osborne, however, others have demonstrated that one can use "a less complicated model of the hermeneutical circle" as well. "Instead of going round and round an endless hermeneutical circle [as the New Hermeneutic would have it ^{NLM}] one can as it were 'spiral in' on the truth, as one asks better questions of a text, and hears more accurate answers" (Carson 1996: 121).

Gadamer's work, building as it does on the "hermeneutical circle" (as further worked through by Heidegger in *Time and Being*), has produced the seminal literary theory regarding the two horizons of the author's past and the interpreter's present. The horizons are obviously a significant dimension of interpretation when anyone interacts with a text, whether in the form of a personal letter, or a learned discourse. This engagement with the text is further described among some literary theorists as an imaginative tour of "the hermeneutical circle," an analogy first suggested by Heidegger but developed more fully by Gadamer as a hermeneutical tool (Gadamer

1999: 266). For both Heidegger and Gadamer this works because the circle “possesses an ontologically positive significance” that is indicative of “the way interpretative understanding is achieved” Moreover, Gadamer calls the hermeneutical circle “a *logical* metaphor” (1999: 266, n187, italics added).

According to Gadamer, here is how the hermeneutical circle works: “A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning” (1999: 267). The projection is not static but dynamic. Gadamer continues:

Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. The process . . . is that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side *until it becomes clearer* what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation (1999: 267, italics added). [Though Gadamer does not say so, the same process of the interchange of projected meanings is sometimes at work *in the writer* of a discourse as well. NLM]

Ricoeur has a somewhat different approach to the hermeneutical circle. For him it is a necessary method for hermeneutics that has a long standing. “There is a circle because the exegete is not his own master. What he wants to understand is what the text says: the task of understanding is therefore governed by what is at issue in the text itself” (1974: 389). There follows his elaboration of this issue:

The hermeneutic circle can be stated roughly as follows: To understand, it is necessary to believe; to believe, it is necessary to understand. This formulation is still

too psychological. For behind believing there is the primacy of the object of faith over faith; and behind understanding there is the primacy of exegesis and its method over the naive reading of the text. This means that the genuine hermeneutic circle is not psychological but methodological. It is the circle constituted by the object that regulates faith and the method that regulates understanding (Ricoeur 1974: 389).

How this necessary engagement with the text affects the reader is given considerable consideration in the writings of Gadamer. At no time, however, does he suggest that one should construct one's own meaning for the text as some of the radical theorists do. Instead, he proposes that readers acknowledge their presuppositions (he calls them "fore-meanings") as they approach texts so that they can learn from authors not only what their words mean but how their own fore-meanings may differ from those of the authors. It is therefore especially important that, while readers invariably project their own fore-meanings onto the text, they allow their fore-meanings to be questioned, affected, and perhaps even changed by what the text presents. "Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy — i. e., the origin and validity — of the fore-meanings dwelling within him [first NLM]" (Gadamer 1999: 267).

Thiselton is an evangelical who has shown appreciation for Gadamer's work and he has used the insights of hermeneutical horizon philosophy to forge a fresh way of approaching hermeneutics. He describes how the goal of hermeneutics in bringing about engagement between reader and author has been changed since Gadamer:

The goal of biblical hermeneutics is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter's own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged. In one sense it is possible to speak, with Gadamer, of the goal of hermeneutics as a 'fusion' of horizons. . . the two horizons can never become totally identical; at best they remain separate but close. . . and

there is always progress *towards* a fusion of horizons. The Bible can and does speak today, in such a way as to correct, reshape, and enlarge the interpreter's own horizons (Thiselton: 1980: xix).

Gadamer's horizons of meaning are a valuable contribution to the field of hermeneutics because, among other things, they offer an approach that differs from the more radical literary theorists who disparage the author's intent. Gadamer, instead, takes seriously the task of engaging with the author's intent in a given text. This is because he assumes that the author's thoughts are not only important but worth the effort required for understanding them.

The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined. . . . A person trying to understand something will not resign himself from the start to relying on his own accidental fore-meanings, ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text until the latter becomes so persistently audible that it breaks through what the interpreter imagines it to be. Rather, *a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. . . .* The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings (Gadamer 1999: 269, italics added).

Engagement with a text, for all that, however, does not mean that one expects to find perfect understanding (Gadamer 1999: 293). The hermeneutical circle has no end and thus there is no stopping place for complete apprehension of meaning. Understanding a text, therefore, is an *ongoing process*, as it were, a process that respects the distance between the author and the reader, a distance set not only in the time that has lapsed between the writer's and reader's history but also that which is settled in personal traditions which Gadamer calls "fore-understandings." This distancing between horizons is such as to cause readers to render tentative judgments as to the meaning of texts. Thus, the interpreter begins with a sober assessment that the tradition of the reader and the tradition of the author cannot perfectly overlap. The basis for engaging in

horizon hermeneutics, then, is “that belonging to a tradition is a *condition* of hermeneutics . . .” (Gadamer: 1999: 291, italics added). This is why the interpreter must not yield to the temptation to understand a text apart from first seeking to understand it as a whole. Elsewhere, Gadamer finds fault with historical critics precisely because their analytical method of study has an atomistic focus which ignores the whole field of a document. He reminds his readers of the fundamental rule of hermeneutics:

We recall the hermeneutical rule that we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole. This principle stems from ancient rhetoric, and modern hermeneutics has transferred it to the art of understanding. It is a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole (Gadamer 1999: 291).

Gadamer is convinced that some shared meaning between the reader and the author, despite their two horizons of understanding, is possible and to some degree, if not perfectly, attainable. Though the horizons of each are different, and for the reader ever changing, “the task of hermeneutics is to clarify [the NLM] miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning” (1999: 292). A horizon is “the limits of thought dictated by a given viewpoint or perspective” (Thiselton 1980: xix).

The essence of valid interpretation, then, as Gadamer sees it, is the “fusion” of the horizons of reader and author. In other words, what is attempted therein is the reader’s serious effort to see things through the eyes of the author, not so much as to submerge his or her own identity with that of the author but, at least, in order that the reader might see what the author is getting at in his or her discourse. A great deal of this endeavor is a simple recognition that those who live in the present are in many ways shaped by the traditions of the past, that is, there is no way to be completely free from the influence of all that has gone before.

In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.* We are familiar with the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naivete about themselves and their heritage. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other (Gadamer 1999: 306).

In an earlier work, Gadamer's translator indicates why he thinks that Gadamer felt the need for positing horizons of interpretation. He explains:

The whole of being that is mirrored and disclosed in language — including the language of texts — gives interpretation its continuing task. The infinity of the unsaid that is essential to language cannot be reduced to propositions, that is, to the merely present-at-hand, for every new interpretation brings with it a new 'circle of the unexpressed.' Thus what is disclosed in human language poses ever new questions to its interpreters and gives new answers to those who are challenged by it and play its meaning further within the dialectic of question and answer. Every conversation has an inner infinity and no end (Linge in Gadamer 1976: xxxii-xxxiii).

But the hermeneutical circle can be problematic, especially for those who believe that hermeneutics should not be an exercise in futility. After all, finite beings don't have an infinity in which to do their hermeneutical work. This does not seem to bother one supporter of Gadamer, however. "Finally, the last characteristic of hermeneutics: interpretation finds itself with the obligation to interpret itself to infinity, always to resume. From which there are two important

consequences. The first is that interpretation will henceforth always be interpretation but by whom? . . . The second consequence is that interpretation must always interpret itself and cannot fail to turn back on itself” (Foucault 1994: 278).

Osborne, on the other hand, while expressing appreciation for Gadamer’s horizons of understanding, does not accept the premise put forth by exponents of the hermeneutical circle that one cannot arrive at something which approaches the significant meaning of a text. Accordingly, he has replaced the metaphor of an *endless* hermeneutical circle with that of a “hermeneutical spiral.” Osborne reveals how his spiral differs from Gadamer’s circle:

The major premise . . . is that biblical interpretation entails a ‘spiral’ from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance for the church today. Scholars since the New Hermeneutic have been fond of describing a ‘hermeneutical circle’ within which our interpretation of the text leads to its interpreting us. However, such a closed circle is dangerous because the priority of the text is lost in the shared gestalt of the ‘language event.’ A ‘spiral’ is a better metaphor because it is not a closed circle but rather an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader. I am not going round and round a closed circle that never can detect the true meaning but am spiraling nearer and nearer to the text’s intended meaning as I define my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for my situation today (1991: 6).

Osborne, like Thiselton, is appreciative of the notion that interpreters must bring their own horizon of experience to bear on their interaction with the author’s horizon. He concurs further with Gadamer’s notion (and before him Schleiermacher and Heidegger) that the character of all human experience, concepts, and institutions is conditioned by time, place, and circumstance. What happens when the reader engages with the text is that there is immediate interaction between the reader and the questions raised by his or her reading of the text. The fusion of

horizons is the interplay that occurs between the two horizons. We put our questions to the text. In turn our own self-understanding is affected by the text and reshaped by it. “A constant back and forth between our world and the world of the text moves us closer and closer to a ‘fusion of horizons’” (Allen 1985: 272). Osborne retains this understanding of Gadamer but finds the circle of questions by themselves an infinitum postponement of significant meaning. He therefore sets up a process of spiraling in on a passage to get at that significant meaning.

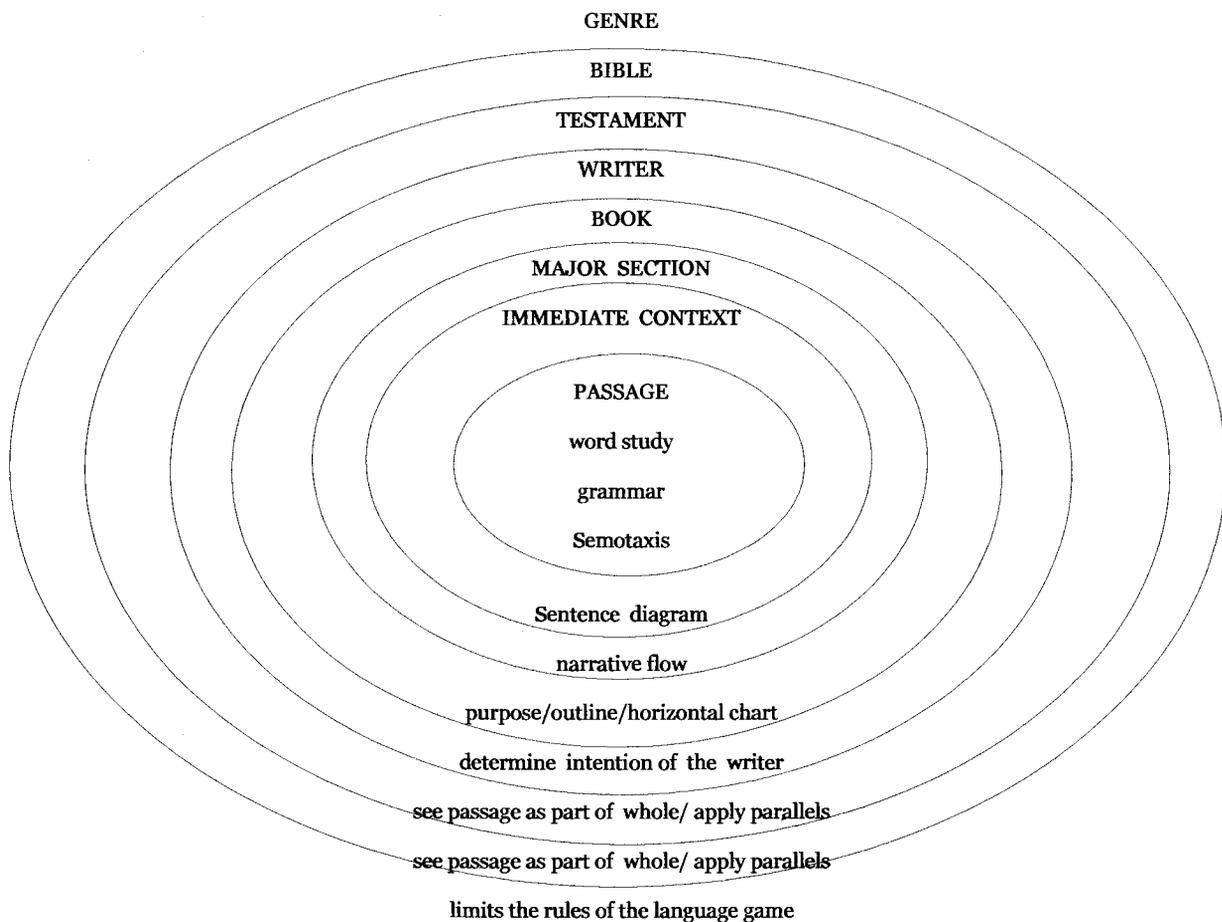
Osborne’s use of a spiral as over against a circle does not mean that he has a disdain for the work of Gadamer or some of the other theorists such as Schleiermacher, Wittgenstein, or Heidegger. To the contrary, Osborne sees value in the works of these literary critics and has found much of their work, though certainly not all of their conclusions, useful for evangelical hermeneutics. For example, while many evangelicals and others have reacted to Wittgenstein’s emphasis on language as “language games,” Osborne has found such a distinction helpful. He thinks that many have misunderstood Wittgenstein in assuming that the philosopher construes language as nothing more than a game of sport such as chess or some other parlor game. Certainly Wittgenstein himself sees nothing light hearted about his approach to the games that he thinks authors and readers are forced to play with language. Rather, Osborne thinks that such an understanding as language games is *required* because of the problems of syntax and semantics. He explains:

‘Semotaxis’ . . . refers to the influence of surrounding words [of a sentence NLM]. This of course can be exceedingly complex, since all the given elements in a surface structure interact with each other. As modifiers increase, the specificity of the statement increases proportionately, for example, ‘his father,’ ‘the father of the blond fellow,’ the father of the blond fellow standing there.’ (1991).

Therefore, according to Osborne, the language games of Wittgenstein are not a sport but a necessary activity to arrive at meaning. Thus, “each word used in a sentence is not an entity in

itself but is a part of a larger activity grounded in everyday life. Moreover, speech-acts have no uniform pattern; hermeneutical rules above all must be flexible enough to allow the syntax to speak for itself, to allow the language to play its own game” (1991: 81). That a game of sport is not what Wittgenstein means to imply by the term: language-games, he himself explains: “Every language game is based on words ‘and objects’ being recognized again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that $2 \times 2 = 4$ ” (1969: 59). Again, he writes: “You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there — like our life” (Wittgenstein 1969: 73).

The following is a chart Osborne has published to show the logical context of hermeneutics (1991: 22) :



Osborne maintains that something like the spiral is necessary to ensure that texts will be studied as *whole documents* rather than as atomistic pericopes. Thus, the spiral enables the reader to engage a text in a two-fold manner: 1) One begins with the genre, that is, the type of literature that one is reading such as fiction or non-fiction, political or religious, prose or poetry, drama or narrative. One does this to “limit the rules of the language game,” that apply to each type. From there one moves from the outside to the inside, that is, from the more general such as the Bible to the more specific such as a book of the Bible, then to the specific reference of that book (such as John 3: 16, for example) until one arrives at the sentences, phrases, grammar and semotaxis of that particular passage. In this way one “spirals” inward into the passage in order to more readily concentrate on the essential matters that are germane to the meaning of that passage; 2) When one has thus reached a particular passage, having established the rules of the language game that apply to it, one begins the hermeneutical task of spiraling deeper and deeper into the passage seeking to get at its full meaning by the application of the available exegetical tools which are at one’s disposal. This is a continuous process that requires one to spiral *inward* into the passage in ever tightening circles until one arrives closer and closer to significant meaning. However, the reader understands that he or she will likely not exhaust the meaning of the passage in this manner but rather draw nearer to it. Subsequent uses of the spiral may yield yet more meaning (1991: 22).

As we saw earlier in the Christian responses to postmodernism, Stanley Grenz is one who uses postmodern insights as a means of revisioning theology so that Christian communities can respond more effectively to the new intellectual and social environment of postmodernism. Accordingly, Grenz has recently reworked his Christian theology by returning to the earlier emphasis which the Bible puts on community. In doing so, however, he seems to have limited his appeal for the revisioning of theology to evangelical Christians rather than to *all the saints* of the church (Ephesians 3: 18). It is possible if not likely, of course, that he would not be at all opposed

to the suggestion that his proposal be made available to the wider Christian community. This does not presume that all Christians would find Grenz's revisioning motif attractive (in fact, some have already indicated that they do not) but it does allow for the possibility that others may wish to take full advantage of insights other than their own in this important area of biblical interpretation. Responsible reading requires this if we are to profit from the ideas of others.

Indeed, responsible reading is limited by a too narrow focus on a single interpretative community. After all, the biblical emphasis on the unity of the church (Ephesians 4: 3-6) is applied to *all* who embrace the major tenets of Christianity not just to one local or regional manifestation of it. Responsible reading through the use of the hermeneutical spiral is enhanced, therefore, when the reader is willing to read *outside of the safe environs* of his or her own ideological haven. It is here that the hermeneutical spiral approach to texts may produce the most intense and fulfilling learning experiences. This is so because the spiral not only deepens one's understanding of one's own faith but enlarges it as well as the ideological positions of others are allowed due consideration when one spirals into the biblical text. This is not to say that one suspends judgment on the value of one's own position while considering the positions of others, but rather that one is willing to consider whether the insights of others may actually aid or assist one's own understanding of the particular text that one may happen to be spiraling in on at the moment. Failure to pursue the matter in this way leaves interpreters ideologically lonely for they have only their own presuppositions to keep them company.

Therefore, one who spirals into the meaning of a biblical text will come up short if one limits oneself to the same ideological territory that one has occupied before. It is in the consideration of other positions that one learns best what one's own position means and how it can be strengthened, or even reconsidered sometimes, by answering the questions raised by those whose positions differ from one's own. The use of the spiral as a reading technique can add therefore, as Diogenes Allen would put it, to the "wealth of conviction" one already possesses as well as make

one's reading more responsible.

Accordingly, Middleton and Walsh, as indicated in chapter five, have applied the principle of the spiral in a way that has provided altogether new ways of looking at the biblical text. They have considered other views quite different from their own and have thereby found ways of using the Gospel as an unexpected refutation of some of the principle tenets of postmodernism. By this I mean that they have generally accepted the postmodern view that some Western texts do indeed promote the interests of Western ruling classes by utilizing texts as oppressive propaganda pieces for the purpose of subjugating others. However, they deny that the Bible does so, and they present a rather compelling argument that neither the Scriptures generally nor Jesus specifically has shown interest in a totalizing metanarrative. Whether one agrees or not with their conclusion is not the point here. The point, rather, is that the authors have shown other Christians that responsible reading means learning how to use the hermeneutical spiral to discover biblical insights from others that they might otherwise have missed.

The need for Gadamer's circle and Osborne's spiral is the more evident when one considers that "no text is ever fully explicated" (Hirsch 1967: 223). Not until the full establishment of the Kingdom of God (the eschaton) comes to pass on Earth will the full outline of what God has intended to say through his prophets and apostles be completely apprehended. Not only are there horizons of perspective between author and reader there are also horizons of perspective *within each person*, perspectives of maturation that change as the world changes and as the individual changes (Hirsch 1967: 223-224).

6.1.3. Responding to the Text: The Holy Spirit's Role in Reading

There is nothing in the New Hermeneutic that suggests the necessity for the assistance of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation. Hermeneutics, therefore, appears to be wholly the work of human effort. If anything, however, the work of literary theorists, especially those who make much of the indeterminateness of the text, has made the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church more

necessary.

So much has been made of the indeterminateness of language by theorists such as Saussure, Foucault, Derrida, et. al., that one might conclude that hermeneutics must inevitably be an exercise in futility. However, though language *is* problematic it is also that gift from God to humanity which makes communication not only possible but enlightening. Moreover, where humanity is limited in understanding due to finiteness and ineptitude, God himself provides illumination through the Spirit. However, this does not mean that God speaks *because* humans speak. Rather, it is because language and creation share a common nature (humans made in God's image) that the speaking Creator gives language to his human counterparts. "All the natural, objective characteristics we observe in human speech . . . are such because they are the characteristics of the Word as an expression of God the Creator" (Ellul 1985: 63-64).

If language is indeterminate in meaning by its very nature, as the literary theorists maintain, how is that to be resolved in order that divine communication might not just be possible but also effectual? It will not be resolved if the Bible is to be read like any other book, that is, by the use of the tools of hermeneutics alone. In a sense, of course, the Bible is to be read like any other book. After all, it provides a text that must be interpreted. In another sense, however, the Bible cannot be read like any other book for as Vanhoozer reminds us, *the subject-matter it furnishes for the interpreter claims to be from God*. "The faithful reading of the Bible, then, is a moral and spiritual activity. To read the Word of God rightly is to allow it to work its transforming effects on the interpreting community" (Vanhoozer 1998: 379). It is for this purpose that God has provided the assistance of the Holy Spirit, that is, especially for the task of interpreting Scripture.

However, the role of the Holy Spirit in assisting the reader of Scripture does not mean that the arduous work of hermeneutics is unnecessary. It does mean that hermeneutics is not enough. It is not enough because divine revelation presumes spiritual illumination. "It is sometimes argued that no natural point of contact already exists between man and the Word of God. . . . This

discontinuity, therefore, can and must be bridged not by hermeneutics but by the work of the Holy Spirit” (Thiselton 1980: 88).

Karl Barth asserts that the subject-matter of Scripture can be known only spiritually, i.e., on the basis of the work of the Spirit. (1955: Volume I, Part 1, 516). One must not conclude from this, however, that the Spirit is limited in his role to assist in biblical interpretation. He is at work also in congregational worship, in the music of composer and singers, in the arts, and in the believer’s normal everyday life. He works, writes Thiselton, “through the normal processes of human understanding, and neither independently of them nor contrary to them” (1980: 90).

Moreover, the Holy Spirit is involved whenever and wherever language is the vehicle for communication between God and humanity. Christians believe that the Spirit functioned in the process of the original utterances of God to the prophets and the apostles, in the inspired accounts of both the Old and New Testaments, and in the illumination of the words of God in both speech and text. Also, of course, the Spirit is present and powerfully at work in the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. As to the horizons of interpretation, the Holy Spirit has been present both when he was conveying truth to the writers of Scripture and later when readers opened the pages to read. Therefore, concludes Gulley in assessing the value of the work of Gadamer from the perspective of the Christian worldview, “It is the function of the Holy Spirit to actualize the ‘fusion of the horizons’” (Dockery 1995: 230).

Vanhoozer concurs with Gulley. Moreover, he proposes that the Augustinian hermeneutic (believe in order to understand) presupposes the work of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. This is because the faith required for the interpretation is itself the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2: 8). “I want to here suggest that the struggle with the text, to discern and do the Word, is ultimately a matter of spirituality. One’s struggle with the text must be conducted in a spirit of understanding — not some vague spirit of peace but the Holy Spirit” (Vanhoozer 1998: 407).

The role of the Holy Spirit in influencing those who read the Scriptures is always

Christocentric, that is, the Spirit witnesses to Christ, his words and deeds, and especially his crucifixion and resurrection (John 15: 26; 16: 13-15). Accordingly, when the Spirit bears witness with the reader of the Bible, he ultimately points him or her to the cross where Christ died and where he or she is given to understand that whoever follows Christ is to die also (Luke 9: 23-24). Thus, it is the reader who is to die, not the author as is the case with radical literary theory. The reader's death, of course, is not meant in a literal sense but in a metaphorical sense. Perhaps, the best way to put it is to assert that the reader's death is nothing less than his or her *transformation* by the power of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Therefore, far from authorship being an exercise of the author's will to power in influencing others, as in Nietzsche and the radical literary theorists, the cross and resurrection serve as a meta-critique which assesses other criteria, and which transforms the very concept of power.

The power of the cross lies precisely not in rhetorical self assertion of manipulation (I Cor. 2: 1-5). . . . The power of the cross does not lie in what merely overwhelms us as impressive (I Cor. 1: 23-25) but because it is derived from 'a Christ crucified' (I Cor. 1: 23). It reevaluates self-affirming, manipulative, dominating power as self-destructive (Thiselton 1992: 615).

The teaching of Jesus is therefore a prolepsis of the meaning of his cross/resurrection and this is what transforms the interpretative horizon of readers who pay heed to his words. Whereas, in postmodern literary theory, many read over the top of the text or against it in order to be free of its alleged "oppressive" worldview, readers of Scripture find that the texts of both Old and New Testaments demand a different kind of response. This is because those who read with (Augustinian) trust in the biblical text (rather than or maybe even in spite of initial suspicion as was the case of the unconverted C. S. Lewis) discover a Word so probing and so radical that they are confronted – through the convicting work of the Holy Spirit (John 16: 7-11) – with the challenge to reconsider their own thoughts and ways. Accordingly, many readers, upon

understanding what they have read in the Scriptures, are motivated by the Holy Spirit to apply their understanding to the act of personal repentance and faith. Others, of course, come to faith through the preaching of the Word of God. In either case, it is the power of the biblical text as the revelatory Word of God, in a sense, that moves both to put to death and to give life.

Therefore, while in postmodernism it is authors who die, in the Christian worldview, it is readers who die. They die to their own will-to-power before the text of Scripture in order that they might find new life through spiritual transformation (Galatians 2: 20). In other words, instead of *re-formulating* the text into a framework that *supports* their own life-world, such readers are *trans-formed* through their encounters with the biblical text (or for that matter, with *any* text that contain the message of the Gospel such as tracts, Bible lessons, books, or even the lyrics of the great hymns of faith). I return, then, to the idea that the radical teaching of Christ, confirmed as it was by his own death at the cross and his subsequent resurrection, is what the Spirit bears witness to in his role of interpreting Scripture to the reader. The teaching of Christ, in this sense, has no parallel anywhere else in all of literature. This is the primary reason why Christians should not accept the death of the author as postmodern theorists insist. To reiterate, therefore, it is the reader who dies before the biblical text rather than its author. This is because the reader is not to put himself or herself first in importance in approaching the biblical text but last. It is at this point that we note the truly revolutionary nature of biblical reading: “Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first” (Mark 10: 31). “Whoever would be great among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10: 44). “Whosoever would save his life will lose it, and whosoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s shall save it” (Mark 8: 35).

Moreover, the illocutionary force of the words of Jesus to change lives, especially when the reader is under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is demonstrated in the testimonies of countless saints. One of the most celebrated is the testimony of Martin Luther as he describes his conversion to Christ. It came through his reading of the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 1: 17. He had

read those words before but not with the same understanding as when the Holy Spirit illuminated them for him. The words were: “He who by faith is righteous shall live.” Not only was his life transformed by these words but, as we now know, history as well.

As the Holy Spirit illumines the biblical text and produces understanding, then, lives are changed. That change, however, is not only in the thinking of persons who conform with Scripture’s truth, there is also a change in their system of ethics.

6.2. Rebuilding Ethical Oughtness

Postmodernism, as might be expected, has a relativistic ethical system completely formed out of the preferences of interpretative communities. The result is moral relativism. Nash explains that the basis for moral relativism, which he calls “ethical subjectivism,” is dependent on the inner, subjective feelings of those who practice it and it is therefore an emotional response. He elaborates:

Ethical relativism is the belief that whenever people say something is morally good, they mean they like it or approve of it. The key to understanding this position and then grasping its failings is seeing that moral judgments, on this view, refer not to the objective good or evil of actions but instead to inner, subjective feelings on the part of the speaker. People who declare an action is right or wrong are doing nothing more than asserting that they, the speakers, feel positively or negatively toward the action Ethical subjectivism turns apparently significant moral judgments into either vacuous tautologies or contradictions. Consider a person who says, ‘I like to get drunk, but I know it’s wrong.’ In ethical subjectivism, this kind of utterance turns out to be a contradiction, to wit, ‘I like to get drunk but I don’t like to get drunk.’ Or take the case of a person who says, ‘I like to do what is right,’ which on subjectivist terms reduces to the vacuous claim that ‘I like to do what I like to do’ (Nash 1999: 342-343).

Christians, on the other hand, have a fixed moral code based on revelation. This is because God has given humanity an intrinsically moral order, that which Paul calls “the work of the law

written on their hearts” (Romans 2: 15). This ethical order (which is fashioned into the nature of humanity by the Creator) is objective rather than relativistic in essence (as is the case for postmodernism), that is, it is independent of human effort. Moreover, this inherent sense of right and wrong is monitored by a universal conscience which God has placed in all humanity. This does not mean that specific codes of right and wrong are themselves objective. In fact, they differ according to their development in particular cultures, but the basic law of moral conduct — a universal sense that some actions are right and others wrong — remains whether written or unwritten. “The human mind has no more power of inventing a new [moral, ethical_{NLM}] value than of giving a new primary color, or indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in” (Lewis 1944: 56).

Even those who choose to live by a particular set of values demonstrate that they ontologically possess a deeper, embedded, universal standard of what is right and wrong whenever they judge the behavior of others. For example, criminals when “double-crossed” by other crooks often complain bitterly when they discover that they cannot trust their colleagues in crime.

Every person who engages in moral judgment implies by his judgment the existence of an objective moral order. This is because the relationship called judging involves at least three terms: the person who judges, the action that is judged, and the standard of judgment by which the judged action is measured. This last, if moral experience is to make sense at all, must be something independent of both of the other terms (Trueblood 1957: 111).

Postmoderns reject any concept, subtle or emphatic, that claims to represent an objective moral order. They believe that moral laws, codes, and virtues are human inventions or constructs, the result of an evolution of moral behavior over time in civilized cultures. For them, a new age requires new ethics. But are persons justified in interpreting the moral sense of right and wrong, or the basic rules of conduct as expressed in the Decalogue of Moses, as time-bound to a

particular ancient culture and therefore irrelevant? Do those moral maxims stand in need of radical or, as in the case of some of the laws, even complete renovation by particular contemporary cultural communities? In postmodern times the answer is unambiguously in the affirmative. This is because postmoderns desire to be free of what they consider the totalizing and oppressive standards of conduct of Western culture. Christianity, on the other hand, embraces the law of God as good and necessary (Romans 7: 12). “The New Testament as a whole, as do Moses and the prophets and Jesus Christ, views the Decalogue as being a peak in ethical revelation. Jesus is not alone in his insistence that the Torah has a permanent duration. It has, in fact, a basis firmer than the stability of the space-time universe . . .” (Henry 1957: 329).

6.2.1. A Transgenerational Ethics: Timeless Significance

A transgenerational ethical system is a timeless moral standard that is not subject to the moral relativism of postmodernism. Specific examples are the prohibitions against murder, theft, and false witness, or the positive injunction to honor one’s parents. Reader-response has simply gone too far with its insistence that, regardless of the author’s intent, readers are free to create their own moral values based on their preference for “what works for them” within a given subgroup or community. Here we see a corollary between postmodernism and a more liberal version of Christianity. For example, postmodernism has heightened the authority of the individual with its emphasis on reader-response thereby creating less restrictive moral codes. Some churches also put a great deal of emphasis on individualism thus supporting the idea of a subjective approach to ethics. But Christians should not be reticent to embrace biblical absolutes. Schaeffer insists that

a finite point is absurd if it has no infinite reference point. This concept is most easily understood in the area of morals. If there is no absolute moral standard then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By *absolute* we mean that which always applies, that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be

an absolute if there are to be *morals*, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real *values*. If there is no absolute beyond man's ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions (1976: 145).

Heretofore, in ecclesiastical circles, the church has made much of diversity and pluralism as unmitigated advantages for communities of faith that would be relevant to the changing mores of culture. The idea is that such communities can find consensus on what should be considered moral or immoral. While this seems a desirable way to develop an ethical system to some, the fact is that the will of individuals in a particular assembly of persons somehow seem more important than the will of the community itself. For example, some individuals have even misappropriated the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of believers interpreting it instead as the priesthood of the believer (singular) thus placing the emphasis on *individual* interpretation of the Bible rather than the community's interpretation of doctrine as received down through the centuries from the classical Christian tradition. Because of this, certain mainline Protestant denominations assiduously seek to build unity (ecumenism) on a basis other than church doctrine. Accordingly, efforts at church union have avoided doctrine (including ethical doctrines), and sought instead to build church union on ecclesiastical polity or administrative functions. Such an approach, however, even when it is successful, is a serious misreading of the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. Luther, as Bishop Lazareth reminded the Ratzinger conferees, "didn't teach that every Christian may interpret the Bible as he sees fit" (Neuhaus 1989: 62). It is clear from the several common doctrinal affirmations of the Ratzinger Conference that such *misunderstandings* of Reformed doctrine would be less likely were there more amicable discussions across denominational lines. At least, such discussions would allow Christians of diverse traditions to learn from each other as regards those doctrines that have long been held by the great majority of Christians through the centuries. This is ecumenicity (though not necessarily formal church

union) at its best.

It is in interpreting the Bible as one personally sees fit without regard to the witness of classical Christian faith through the ages that the new morality of postmodernism becomes problematic for the church. After all, how can one hold that all ethical claims are *equally* true? For example, postmoderns who are involved in the church seem to be able to hold conflicting moral positions depending upon which societal subgroup he or she is participating in at the time. J. P. Moreland presents a case of a young man who belongs to more than one social subgroup and relates the moral confusion he experiences in the various groups.

Suppose Fred is an eighteen-year-old college freshman who is a member of a social fraternity and a member of a Baptist church. His social fraternity may hold that it is morally obligatory to get drunk at parties, the university may hold that such acts are not obligatory but at least permissible, and the Baptist church may hold that such an act is morally forbidden. It is hard to tell which society is the morally relevant one. So these objections point out that even if we have a clear notion of what constitutes a society (and this is a difficult task), we still have the problem that some acts are done in more than one society by people who belong to more than one society (1987: 242-243).

What Moreland does not note is that this creates multiculturalism *within a single person* thus creating a tension as to which moral position in that person should take precedence over the other. Accordingly the individual who holds more than one conflicting moral position at the same time may create an even greater moral confusion in the society at large not to mention the confusion he or she experiences in his or her soul.

While individualism tends to contribute to moral relativism, postmodern community values are also relativistic though this is more the case in some communities than others. Community itself is not a postmodern idea. The Christian church has long understood the importance of

building community as an essential element of what it means to be Christian, the church itself being the quintessential community. But what happens when there is a plurality of communities, each with its own ideas about issues of common concern? Grenz addresses this issue:

In a multicultural context the focus on a community-based ethic leads to the new ethical pluralism of the postmodern ethos. In a situation in which multiple communities exist side by side, ethical discourse becomes a discussion of the moral practices of differing communities. The underlying assumption, of course, is that what appears wrong from one vantage point, when viewed from within the community that practices the act, may actually be right . . . Do postmodern ethicists offer any way whereby we might move beyond the impasse posed by competing moral communities? Is there anything that transcends the multiplicity of social groups that exist side by side in our global village and thereby bring humans from different communities together? (1997: 210-211).

While postmodern ethicists offer no answers for this conundrum, Grenz's book represents a significant effort by a leading evangelical to set forth an adequate Christian response. Moreover, other Christian authors maintain that the *difference* between the worldview of Christianity and the position of postmodernism in this matter is a distinction that relates to the correspondence between time and eternity. This is because the ethical system of postmodern materialism is based on short-lived pleasure and values while the ethical system of Christianity is based on eternal verities. The former has an ethics for today, the latter an ethics for eternity as well. As Lewis puts it, these differences are profoundly significant. He writes:

. . . where the Materialist would simply ask about a proposed action 'Will it increase the happiness of the majority?', the Christian might have to say, 'Even if it does increase the happiness of the majority, we can't do it. It is unjust.' And all the time, one great difference would run through the whole policy. To the Materialist things like nations, classes, civilizations must be more important than individuals, because the

individuals live only seventy odd years each and the group may last for centuries. But to the Christian, individuals are more important, for they live eternally; and races, civilizations and the like, are in comparison the creatures of a day (1970: 109-110).

6.2.2. A Transcultural Ethics: Virtues Versus Values

Values form the ethical system for postmodern interpretative communities. These are relative to particular communities and they are arbitrarily chosen by communities. They have no status of permanency in themselves. What one chooses today one may choose to replace with something else tomorrow (Wells 1998: 23). In other words, there is no *objective standard* for the choice of values. Furthermore, when one fails to live in accordance with a particular value there may be at best regret and at worst indifference. This differs with those who are committed to an ethical system based on virtues. Failure to adhere to ethical standards in the traditional sense produces an objective emotional pain called guilt (Here I hold no brief for subjective guilt *feelings*). Virtues, informed as they are by theology and insofar as they are representative of God's revealed will, inherently suggest a sense of permanency. Values, on the other hand, are what is left when virtues have been forsaken by a culture. Wells explains:

At the turn of the century, Nietzsche pioneered what, by a different route, has come to be embraced in popular culture today. Gertrude Himmelfarb, whose principle field has been Victorian England, has observed that morality became so thoroughly relativized and subjectified that virtues ceased to be virtues. They had become 'values.' In Nietzsche, this transition was the deliberated outcome of his belief in the death of all truth and morality. Virtue had to be replaced by values . . . values may mean nothing more than a preference, belief, feeling, habit, or convention (1998: 16).

Since values are neutral regarding the question of right and wrong, those who hold them tend to be non-judgmental, though not indifferent, toward those who violate them or choose to

ignore them. Virtues, on the other hand are decidedly not neutral in character; they are strongly biased toward what is right or true as moral judgments. Values, because they are mere personal or group preferences, when violated, leave the offenders with the option of choosing other values or *none* to replace the ones they seem unable or unwilling to honor. Virtues, however, when violated call for decision, for judgment, and even for condemnation. In a culture that rejects authority where possible and does not respect it otherwise, it is easy to see why values would be preferred to virtues.

For this reason, I do not think anything has been definitely decided; everything still remains open after Nietzsche. It seems to me that only one path has been decisively closed off, that of an onto-theology which culminates in the idea of a moral god, conceived as the origin and foundation of an ethics of prohibition and condemnation (Ricoeur 1974: 447).

However, unlike the ephemeral nature of postmodern values, Christian virtues have a long and noble standing in the West. The Seven Cardinal Virtues, as they were known in ancient and medieval literature and art, were those of faith, hope, charity, prudence, temperance, chastity, and fortitude. One observer breaks these down into theological (faith, hope and charity) and Platonic (prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude) “to make a more or less tidy scheme of seven” (Oppenheimer in Richardson and Bowden 1983: 600). Nevertheless, these are all prominent in biblical texts. Such virtues have little or no value in postmodern times yet they are the background of the development of an enduring moral sense of right and wrong in Western culture. Virtues were also a conspicuous part of the contribution that the Reformed faith of Protestantism made to the academy in the early history of America (Marsden 1994: 101-102).

The place of virtues, however, is rooted in a past that is much older than that of America’s development of education. For example, Thomas Aquinas gave close attention to it in his classic theological treatise *Summa Theologica* as a few excerpts reveal:

. . . no virtue which perfects the intellect embraces what is false, since the false is the evil of the intellect . . . now faith is a virtue which perfects the intellect . . . What is false cannot therefore be held in faith. . . . the true is the good of the intellect, but not of any appetitive virtue. Hence all virtues which perfect the intellect entirely exclude the false, since it is in the nature of a virtue to embrace only that which is good (1954: 223).

Aquinas' reflections on virtue and vice have set the standard for Christians throughout the subsequent history of the church. His writings indicate that he had thought deeply of the implications of virtue for authentic Christian ethics. He clearly saw virtue as the gift of theology not only to the church but also to the culture at large. By it humanity could sharpen a discernment of what made for a noble and gracious life. Aquinas writes: "By the habit of virtue . . . a virtuous man rightly judges what is becoming for that virtue" (1954: 245-246). And, again, ". . . a virtue is said to be theological on the ground that it has God as the object to which it adheres" (1954: 300).

Aquinas, however, did not imagine that the acquisition of virtue was easy. To the contrary, he understood that virtue was difficult to attain while vice was all too easy to acquire. "For Thomas, the towering master of all the doctors of the Church, falling into vice is as easy as falling from a ladder, whereas the acquisition of virtue is a slow and unspectacular process" (Charles 1999: 51). Therefore, if the Church is to restore its moral vision for the twenty-first century a recovery of emphasis on virtues as found in the works of Aquinas might be a good place to start.

Virtues, therefore, are moral standards of conviction and conduct that form a permanent code of ethics transcending time and culture. They are *not* the constructions of particular cultures but are rather transcendent in nature, given by God through revelation for the benefit of all humanity. Thus, those who fall short of these universal virtues, if they have biblically informed consciences, experience more than regret; they experience shame. Shame is a strong emotion. It is "a disturbed or painful feeling of guilt, incompetence, indecency or blameworthiness. . . .

dishonor; disgrace . . .” (Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary 1983).

Thus, virtue is moral excellence and accordingly is the best remedy for vice because it *prevents* it. It is thus superior in this sense to the moral values of postmodern pluralistic communities. In such communities it is understood that moral codes are what they are because they have evolved through time as a means for protecting the community from whatever is judged detrimental to its good. Such codes are thus human inventions or constructs of the community. At least, this is the judgment of leading anthropologists and materialists. Christian virtues, on the other hand, have no existence apart from the revelation of God for they are theological in nature.

Yet, even the moral values of postmodern communities which seem to have little or no theological significance may go deeper than is commonly supposed. Could it be that the moral order in humanity is the way it is because God, the author of life, has written it into the warp and woof of what it means to be human? Of course, such a proposition cannot be verified through empirical means. On the other hand, neither can it be disproved. “Scientific explanations cannot be used to rule out the possibility that nature’s order is the way it is because it is intended” (Allen 1989: 54).

While there is some gain for Christianity in the postmodern rejection of facile scientific and empirical confidence in objective truth this does not mean that there are no absolute foundations for ethical behavior. “Christian morality is founded on . . . belief in an absolute moral order existing outside of, and yet somehow inscribed into man’s very being. It is a morality flowing from the nature of the Creator through the nature of created things, *not a construction of the human mind*. It is a part of God’s general revelation to man” (Noebel 1991: 24 1, italics added).

This transcultural ethical system based on virtue is radically different from moral codes. Christianity did not invent it nor did Judaism introduce it to the world. Christians believe that virtue is given by God as a means of building a stable moral center for human behavior. Accordingly, the apparent human need for moral codes seems to have its origin in general

revelation in that almost every religion has some version of the principle of treating others as one wishes oneself to be treated. As people live together in communities they soon find that the value they put on life prohibits murder, an innate sense of fairness forbids theft, and justice demands truthfulness. These moral principles, and others of like nature, seem to go deeper in the human psyche than mere human preference.

The Moral Law, or Law of Human Nature, is not simply a fact about human behavior in the same way as the Law of Gravitation is, or may be, simply a fact about how heavy objects behave. . . . And it is not simply a statement about how we should like men to behave for our convenience; for the behaviour we call bad or unfair is not exactly the same as the behaviour we find inconvenient, and may even be the opposite. Consequently, this Rule of Right and Wrong, or Law of Human Nature, or whatever you call it, must somehow be the real thing – a thing that is really there, *not made up by ourselves*. And yet it is not a fact in the ordinary sense, in the same way as our actual behaviour is a fact. It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; that, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men's behaviour, and yet quite definitely real – a real law, which none of us made, but which is pressing on us (Lewis 1960: 16, italics added).

But the recovery of the ethics of Christian virtue is not likely to occur unless there is first a recovery of the Christian worldview. Thus, the time has come for a fresh look at the strengths of the Christian metanarrative.

6.3. Recovering the Grand Narrative of Christianity

Few would dispute the notion that of the metanarratives as they are now called by postmodern literary theorists, Christianity has had the greatest influence on the social and intellectual development of the West. Examples are provided by Max Weber's detailed analysis of

Protestantism's influence in ethics and economics (Habermas 1984: 143-243) and even Marx provides an example since he worked out his classless utopian societal ideal out of a distortion of biblical principles (Habermas 1984: 351 ff.)

Though it is difficult to discern in these postmodern times, Christian ideals and principles also had much to do with the development of science and technology due to the emphasis placed by theologians on the order and rational structure of God's creation. The cosmos was therefore understood to be predictable in its order and pattern because it was the creation of a wise and benevolent God. The scope and magnitude of these things is what makes Christianity's story the grandest of metanarratives. The grand narrative of Christianity "is the story of God's action in history for the salvation of fallen humankind and the completion of God's intentions for creation . . . The focus of this metanarrative is Jesus" (Grenz 1996: 164).

But Christianity as a grand narrative is in need of recovery. The attack on the rationality of language by postmodern literary critics has made that task difficult though certainly not impossible. These critics, as we have seen, view all literature, including the Bible, as veiled attempts to impose the will-to-power on others. Compounding this perspective is the idea that authors tend to diminish their authority because of intertextuality, that is, their writings are not original because they are the result of countless and untraceable sources. This, in turn, leads to deconstructionism as a means of identifying and thus revealing the concealed agendas of authors. As a result of all this the Christian worldview, based as it is on revelation, especially the revelation that God is revealed supremely in Jesus Christ (the Incarnation), is seen as just one more attempt to "oppress" others with its authoritarian claim that Christ is "*the way, the truth, and the life*" (John 14: 6). Postmodernists believe that such claims of exclusivism and objective truth have no legitimate standing in a postmodern intellectual environment.

It cannot be denied, even as postmodernists insist, that some literary works do function as attempts to establish the control of the "ruling classes" over the lives of others. Therefore, the

question raised by postmodern literary theory for Christians is this: Is there a detectable will- to- power in the New Testament and if so what is it? This question is then augmented by another: What is the will- to- power of the cross and resurrection of Christ? Put another way, what ruling class in New Testament times would have had the motivation to reveal the surpassing grace and forgiveness which Jesus exhibited (Luke 23: 34a) when he was dying on the cross? There is a will- to- power in the cross and the resurrection but it is expressed best as God's unmerited favor to all so that all who believe in Christ might be delivered from destruction and have eternal life (John 3: 16). There is therefore a hermeneutic of the cross-event (an event that includes the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ) that seeks and provides an answer to this question: What, after all, is the "will-to-power" of a crucified and resurrected Savior?

Accordingly, the hermeneutic of the cross- event enlightens human notions of power but only when attended by an adequate understanding of its meaning. For instance, the cross itself *does not stand alone* in the context of the Gospel. When Paul told the Corinthians that he would "know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2: 2), or the Galatians that he "gloried in the cross" (Galatians 6: 14), he had more in mind than the crucifixion by itself; he also had in mind the resurrection and even the ascension of Christ. This is because the death of Christ was in vain without the resurrection, and the victory of the cross over demonic forces incomplete, without his assumption of authority at the right hand of his Father after his ascension (1 Corinthians 15: 3-4; 13-14; 16-17; 1 Peter 3: 22- 4:1). It was thus that he "spoiled principalities" and "made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it [that is, in the event of the cross NLM]" (Colossians 2: 14-15). It is these components of his suffering, redemptive sacrifice, resurrection, and ascension, that make up what I am choosing to call the *cross- event*. Moreover, I am arguing that such components reveal that God was making a deliberate move in the cross-event from powerlessness to power.

It is evident, then, that God intended through Christ to conquer sin, death, and the demonic

principalities that have ruined his perfect creation (Romans 8: 20-21). Thus, we have in the cross-event God's perfect will-to-power as it is revealed in his forgiveness of sins, victory over death, defeat of evil, and ultimately, his restoration of the cosmos to its pristine wholeness. In summary, there is a will-to-power in the cross-event but it is benevolent not oppressive, restorative and not destructive. It is thus that the resurrection and the ascension of Christ reveal *a different kind of power*, a power that is weak from the perspective of humans (who prefer force and coercion) but mighty from the perspective of God (who insists on mercy and grace). This God-view of what transpired at the cross, as over against the human view, turns human understanding of power on its head. Such is the treatment of powerlessness and power in the biblical texts that relate to the cross-event.

Therefore, it turns out that the postmodernists are right after all. There is a will-to-power in texts. Likewise, resident in the Gospel of Christ there is a will-to-power. But it is not concealed; it is there for all to see. It is the power of God to use the powerlessness of the cross (the weakness of God) to reconcile people to himself but this is not a divine afterthought. The Scriptures are replete with examples of how God has moved from powerlessness to power in his redemptive mission. It can be seen in the fore-shadowing of the cross in the "suffering servant" passages in the Old Testament and it is evident that God intended to use the powerlessness of suffering as another use of power (Psalm 22: 1, 8, 14-15; Isaiah 53: 4-5). Moreover, while it appeared to those who witnessed his suffering on the cross that Jesus seemed defeated and utterly helpless (Matthew 27: 39-40), things are not always what they appear. Even in the powerlessness of the cross itself God demonstrates his power to reconcile sinners to himself for it is at the cross that God makes those who were once his enemies his friends forever in the atonement (2 Corinthians 5: 18-19). Thus, deconstruction when applied to the biblical texts that describe Christ's suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, will produce an understanding of powerlessness and power that is quite different from that which appears in so-called "oppressive" texts.

Moreover, this act of reconciliation which was and is the will-to-power of the suffering Savior is not for the enfranchised only but for the disenfranchised as well, for the poor and for those who are maimed (Matthew 11: 5). Indeed, if anything, the disenfranchised are *more likely* to be reconciled. “For consider your calling, brethren, . . . not many wise . . . not many mighty . . . not many noble . . . but God has chosen the weak things of the world . . . the base things . . . the things that are not, so that he may bring to nothing the things that are” (1 Corinthians 1: 26-28).

A close reading of the New Testament texts, therefore, reveals that the cross-event is God’s will-to-power; it is his will that Christ was to suffer on behalf of others and that the world would know about it through the proclamation of the Gospel. The world would know that the Messiah would come as “a man of sorrows acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53: 3), a man who came to serve not to be served, one who considered “his equality with God not a thing to be grasped” but one who emptied himself and “took upon himself the form of a bond-slave” (Philippians 2: 6-7). For this reason Christ rebuked his disciples for seeking power (Mark 9: 33-35) and instead invited them to follow his example of humble servitude (John 13: 12-17).

Unfortunately, Christians have been their own worst enemy in bringing about the decline of the influence of Christianity in the West. This is so because the principle of the “weakness of God” (1 Corinthians 1: 24-25) as revealed in the cross-event has not, in the main, been historically exhibited before a watching world by the followers of their humble and crucified Lord. From the Crusades onward, including the Inquisitions of Roman Catholicism, the internecine warfare between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, and the establishment of power-politics in America, Christians have not consistently conveyed the central message of the crucified one to others. In a way, then, the disestablishment of the Christian worldview, while much the fault of Christians, can turn out to be beneficial to all *if* its recovery can reestablish the situation that Christians have returned to the hermeneutic of the cross/resurrection. This return, however, must be communicated effectively to others.

6.3.1. Communication and Revelation

Again, what is the will to power of a crucified savior? To show how far genuine Christianity is from the use of a will-to-power as a means of oppressing others, we have Paul's words that believers are "not to look to their own interests but the interests of others" (Philippians 2: 4 and Galatians 6: 2). Therefore, Christians are to bear one another's burdens not place burdens on the shoulders of others. This, of course, is in the spirit of the hermeneutic of the cross-event. Jesus did not teach his disciples to seek or use power for its own sake but to yield to the will of God as expressed in the suffering of the cross. But to do this they must know the meaning of the cross-event and effectively communicate that meaning to others. Postmoderns, on the other hand, seem far more interested in exposing the concealment of the will-to-power as an expression of neo-colonialism than the will to discover and know truth. Also, they seem to have become obsessed with the use of power as a means of overcoming the influence of Christianity and the other perceived dogmas of the West. This is why they are so attracted to Nietzsche. Nietzsche attacked Christianity with a vengeance (Atchison 1996: 35). It is said that he did not so much hate God (though he was an atheist) as he hated the God *of the Christians*. He hated Luther particularly because the Reformer "had had the audacity to resuscitate a dying church" (Atchison: 1996: 35).

Christians at their best, on the other hand, are to be obsessed with the meaning of the cross-event because they follow the one who rejected the human use of power while exalting the revelation of such truth as the only way to liberate his people (John 8: 32). On the other hand, those who follow power for its own sake seem more interested in *shaping* what passes for truth than discovering it. This is why some Christians seem determined to expose the hermeneutic of suspicion when it is used by some as a cover for the inappropriate uses of power. Nash, for example, in order to level the playing field for all interpreters, wishes to turn the hermeneutic of suspicion on the postmodernists themselves. To do so, he turns to an anonymous author for support.

Either deconstructionists are among the dumbest people ever to get university teaching positions, or there is something sinister going on. But deconstructionists are not dumb, though at times they can put on a convincing act. So what are they really up to? As we learn from the hermeneutics of suspicion, whatever a text is hiding has to do with power, never with truth. It hardly seems a coincidence that many deconstructionists are Marxists. . . As for Marxist intellectuals in America, the name of their game also is power. They know that deconstructionism is bunk. The real purpose of the deconstructionist power brokers is to separate as many Americans as possible from their families and from their literature and traditions. If we cannot know the meaning of any text, then we cannot know the meaning of the Bible, including the Ten Commandments. Neither can we know the meaning of the United States Constitution or any other text that might sustain social order or provide meaning and direction to life (Nash 1999: 241).

Nash admits that the words of his anonymous source are a bit strong but he publishes them because, whether intended by those who hold to the hermeneutic of suspicion or not, the result of the work of deconstructionists on those who hold to biblical principles is the same. He maintains, therefore, that the hermeneutic of suspicion is “exclusively a tool of the radical political and cultural left” (1999: 241).

Christians must therefore be alert to the perils of postmodernism especially as it relates to language or much ground will be lost in reestablishing a distinctive Christian worldview. This can only be accomplished by an undaunting commitment to the truth of biblical revelation.

Christian thought must not let postmodern theory guide its critique: it should be guided by a hermeneutics of faith, which in turn must be guided by biblical revelation. A Christian critical theory must not only confront the hermeneutics of suspicion articulated by the ‘masters of suspicion.’ It must also turn its own hermeneutics upon these ‘masters.’ Ricoeur has called for this critique as well, arguing . . . [for a NLM] ‘de-

construction of the assurances of modern man.' In order to turn to the positive task of a hermeneutics of faith, the hermeneutic of suspicion must be directed not only against Christianity, but also against the modern and postmodern masters of suspicion (Ingraffia 1995: 238-239).

Foremost, for Christians, is the commitment to the truthfulness of biblical revelation. Thus, any attack by Christian scholars on the masters of suspicion must not be an exercise of power but an argument based on truth. This is because Christ has made it clear to his followers that truth is superior to power for its own sake and this is why the effective communication of it remains so important. The words of truth must be communicated. Communication simply means that "to speak is to say something about something. . . . It is on the level of the sentence that language says something; short of it, it says nothing at all" (Ricoeur 1974: 87).

Thus it is that Christians must not ignore the charge by postmodern literary critics when they say that Western literature is corrupt because it perpetuates the will- to- power of the ruling classes. Though the geographical origin of the Bible is not the West but the East this matters not to its critics; they still consider it a Western text and thus subversive of the rights of minorities. There is a cause for embarrassment at this point for the Christian and it is the better part of honor simply to admit it. It would be useless in any case to deny that history demonstrates certain abuses by the institutional church such as the misuse of Scripture in order to perpetuate the institution of slavery or the justification of going to war in order to perpetuate power for its own sake.

But can it be successfully argued that the message of the Bible is genuinely reflected in its *misreading* by those who are determined to appropriate it for ulterior selfish motives? To the contrary, since the Bible is the written revelation of God it becomes incumbent upon all to use sound exegesis in expounding its central message that God has spoken to declare his thoughts and ways. Moreover, such a communication is not the invention of humanity. "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For

prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along [Gk. *pheromenoi*] by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1: 20-21). It is this revelation of God that must be communicated if Christianity is to be recovered as a valid and respectable worldview. Such a worldview sees the world as a reality that demands that what is described in language comport with what is actually there.

6.3.2. Congruence with Reality

A major difference between those who adhere to the principles of postmodern literary criticism and those who are committed to traditional epistemology and hermeneutics is their view of the function of language in communication. For the former, language serves as a tool of pragmatism; it is not therefore necessary that it should describe reality or express objective truth. For the latter, however, the validity of language is that its propositions must describe an objective real world. This is why Vanhoozer (1998: 217) identifies with the traditionalist approach to hermeneutics which insists that every competent speech act must meet three ‘validity conditions:’ 1) “It must be true” (that is, “represent something in the external, objective world”); 2) “It must be truthful” (that is, “it must sincerely express the inner, subjective world of the speaker’s intentions”); and 3) “It must be right” (that is, “it must fit appropriately into the context of the social world”).

However, in pursuing truth as the foundation for reality, Christians must be careful that they do not claim as a matter of right or by sheer fiat that their interpretations of God’s revelation are right simply because they say so. There is the matter of the validity of interpretation. Hirsch, who stands far to the right of the radicals in the compendium of literary theorists, explains:

While there is not and cannot be any method or model of correct interpretation, there can be a ruthlessly critical process of validation to which many skills and many hands may contribute. Just as an individual act of interpretation comprises both a hypothetical and a critical function, so the discipline of interpretation also comprises the having

of ideas and the testing of them. . . . Conflicting interpretations can be subjected to scrutiny in the light of the relevant evidence, and objective conclusions can be reached. . . . Devising subsidiary interpretative hypotheses capable of sponsoring probability decisions is not in principle different from devising experiments which can sponsor decisions between hypotheses in the natural sciences. But although the divinatory faculty is essential even in the validating process, the essence of that process is the making of judgments on the basis of all the relevant evidence that has so far been brought forward, and such judgments can be made in the light of day (1967: 206).

What Hirsch proposes as a valid way of arriving at interpretation, however, must not only take place “in the light of day,” but as we indicated earlier and the Church has long affirmed, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The point here in using Hirsch’s hermeneutic is that the result must be one that is valid, that is, one that reflects truth and thus reality.

The fuzziness of postmodern thinking on the issue of validity is shown in the way that many people, “acting under a false sense of tolerance, are reluctant to disagree with the opinions of other people, no matter how false those opinions may be” (Nash 1999: 25). Why is this so? It may be so because these people have only a superficial understanding of the philosophies of postmodern era thinking. Nash suggests that postmodernists think that worldviews, invalid as they are, “are created equal whether their creators happen to be Mother Teresa or Adolf Hitler”(1999: 25). Of course, it is doubtful that, given that choice, they would agree with Nash’s hypothesis but it only shows the irrationality of this kind of thinking. “You have your worldview (interpretation) and I have mine,” (Nash 1999: 25) they seem to say and who is to say which is valid or invalid?

Nash suggests four tests for determining whether a worldview represents reality: 1) The Test of Reason [that is, is it logical, does it satisfy the law of non-contradiction? NLM]; 2) The Test of Outer Experience . . . that is, “worldviews should be relevant to what we know about the world and ourselves;” 3) The Test of Inner Experience [that is, borrowing from the phenomenology of Husserl

(1858-1938), does the worldview comport with the way that things *appear* to us? NLM]; and 4) The Test of Practice . . . “Can people who profess that worldview live consistently in harmony with the system they profess” (1999: 26-32)?

As Weaver has written, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948). Foucault’s rejection of the authority of authors as a feature of his literary theory was consistent with his rejection of all authority, including his own. According to his biography Foucault spent his entire life seeking to “undo himself.” He records Chomsky’s assessment of him after their discussion together in a 1971 Dutch television broadcast: “‘I’d never met anyone so totally amoral’ ” (Meyer 1997: 58). Meyer’s review of James E. Miller’s book on Foucault’s life contains the following record of Foucault’s extreme left wing views: “The utopian anarchist [Chomsky NLM] with the furrowed brow had been treated to a dose of Foucault’s considered views: no human nature, no social models, no justice, no law, no responsible human subjects. ‘One makes war to win, not because it’s just,’ Foucault explained. And if the winners exercise bloody violence on the losers, ‘I can’t see what objection one could make to that’ ” (Meyer 1997: 58).

The point is that when one rejects any notion of authority, as is the case with Foucault, one’s sense of reality is seriously distorted. On the other hand, the Christian worldview is one that claims that it comports with the reality of the world as God has created it. This claim is rejected, of course, by Foucault and other left wing literary critics. But even those who deny that claim still must deal with its vision of a divinely ordered ethical reality or, as was the case with Foucault for his entire life, react against it.

The Scriptures present to its readers claims of the reality of God’s relationship to humanity and humanity’s obligations to respond to divine revelation. Moreover, Christians maintain that what the Bible claims is based on a reliable text. Therefore, the sentences that make up its content accurately convey what God wants to communicate to his creatures. Only if this is so can those who read it have any confidence that it accords with reality. The relationship of all

this to literary theory is not at first apparent but nonetheless critically important. Semiotics is the science of signs and semantics, the science of sign language. The Derridean split, as I shall call it, sets up a battle between the two, that is, between signs and what they signify in sentences. The result, according to postmodern literary critics, is indeterminability. This raises the question of whether we can therefore really know what sentences mean. But if we cannot know what they mean, how can we know whether what we read in the Bible, or for that matter in the writings of postmodernists, is true? Therefore, we must know what sentences mean if we are to know the significance of our existence in the universe which God has created (the Anthropic Principle). Even life and death issues can and are often decided by the utter reliability of meaningful sentences, though such meaning is attendant with the semantical necessity of discerning the context of both subject and predicate. For example, the word "cancer" describes a dreaded disease but standing alone has little or no significance. It is just a word. However, all that changes when words are linked together to form a meaningful sentence. When a doctor, after reviewing a patient's test results, says to that patient: "You have cancer," then, and only then is something communicated that has real significance. The one who hears those fateful words from the doctor assumes that the words the doctor uses to frame that statement are both determinate and reliable, pregnant with meaning and not nonsensical, and that the words comport with the reality of his or her situation. Likewise, our view of language has implications for how we receive communication from God. What we want and need to know is that the language of revelation comports with the reality of our personal existence. This is what readers may assume about the revelation of God and this is what postmodernism questions.

We cannot see God. We cannot feel God. There is no image of God. According to the Decalogue, which Moses received on Mount Sinai, humans are forbidden to make images of God (Exodus 20: 4). We can hear God, however, through his Word. It is through the Word that communication between the Creator and the creature takes place. God is, after all, the first Author

of all communication. “We continually bump into the limitation which irritates us: we must understand the meaning of the Bible’s great affirmation that God is manifested [in special revelation NLM] *only* in his Word. We can never grasp God elsewhere or otherwise” (Ellul 1985: 50, italics added).

But God is. Because that is true the Gospel makes sense in a real world and is consistent with “what is there.” However, postmodernism is there also. Christians must relate to it in some way and this is what many have done. As we enter the twenty-first century it is very likely that postmodernity will follow modernity into intellectual demise, if not oblivion. Christianity has survived many challenges including the heretical challenges of the first few centuries. But it must do more than survive; it must flourish and this it can do if it is willing not only to react to postmodernism but wherever possible, without betraying its metanarrative nature, respond.

6.4. Some Closing Thoughts

Postmodernity is the rejection of the central postulates of modernity. Therefore, with it have come various assessments on the status of modernity in recent years. Some have announced its collapse, others that it is “dying” or “dead.” In any case, there seems to be general agreement that many of its postulates are intellectually exhausted and its influence on Western culture greatly weakened. Nonetheless, it remains so that while the hegemony of modernity is broken there continue to be places in the culture where its mentality holds sway, most notably in science and technology (Thornhill 2000: 59-64). Thus, modernity and postmodernity seem to be parallel movements in our culture with the former in retreat and the latter in advance. It is significant also to note in this review, however, that the advancing movement is termed: *post-modernity* not *anti-modernity*. Therefore, the progressive spirit of modernity and its secular mentality remain.

Since postmodernity is replacing modernity it is only in the nature of the case to ask what will replace postmodernity. While nothing has yet appeared on the cultural horizon, it may justifiably be assumed that postmodernity will follow modernity into eclipse given sufficient time. For one

thing, the litany of its several principles such as intellectual relativism, ethical relativism, the *creation* of “truth” rather than its discovery, and the indeterminacy of language, among others, seems to have had its source in literary theory. This provides no stability for Christianity because today’s theory often gives way to tomorrow’s newer theory.

I do not think Wright is too cynical when he concludes, ‘Deconstructive criticism will go away; it is in the nature of sudden reflex-movements of absurdist cognitive scepticism to be short-lived.’ As a colleague of mine put it, left to itself, the academic side of these movements would probably die of boredom; unfortunately, the secondary cultural dissemination will probably carry on for some time (Carson 1996: 136).

It remains to be seen, therefore, how long Western culture is willing to abide the startling claims that texts have *no* inherent meaning in themselves, that there is no *objective* truth, that all truth claims are *equally* valid or invalid. It is doubtful that any culture will long rest easy with the intellectual and spiritual shallowness of such theory. After all, many hunger for greater depth and significance for their lives than can be afforded by such theory.

Nevertheless, the arrival of postmodernity has been salutary for Christianity. It has provided a new opportunity for Christianity to move from the periphery of the ideological world to which it has been banished by secularism, to a position closer to its center. There are a number of signs that the reestablishment of a Christian worldview, as a viable intellectual and cultural framework for thinking, has been advancing on many fronts. Among them is the increasing willingness of many in this postmodern age to admit that the Christian metanarrative has as least as much claim to serious consideration as any other. Moreover, new developments in Narrative Theology and the responsible reading of texts have been profitable for biblical study in that a place for the “wholistic” reading of the biblical primary sources is replacing the “atomistic” historical-critical reading of the same in many quarters. Some are even talking of a new methodology, a Method “C” or some other method that would make it the goal of critics and students of the Bible to express

more interest in what the Bible *means* rather than what it *does not mean*, and to stress what is *authentic* in it rather than what is *inauthentic*.

As I have indicated, there is also a developing new paradigm that is taking hold in science known as Intelligent Design. This paradigm focuses on the accumulating evidence that there is purpose in the natural order. If this is true, then, “the origin of species” is not the result of “blind chance” as the naturalists claim but the work of an Intelligent Designer even as the Bible clearly affirms. Moreover, the move away from Darwinian undirected evolution, though now in its incipient stages, is certain to have profound implications for worldview ideology. For one thing, it is a blow against naturalism as a philosophy and a boon for supernatural thinking such as is at the heart of the Christian worldview. The intricate balance of forces in the natural order or the “fine-tuning” of the same as proponents of Intelligent Design call it, clearly demands a rethinking of whether life itself is not also intended for purposes that far transcend the postmodern despair of Nietzsche or the modern “survival of the fittest” of Darwin. In such a case, responsible reading would include not only a more effective reading of all texts, including biblical texts, but also a greater appreciation for the meaning of life itself. Such rethinking, if it occurs, cannot but help to contribute to the reestablishment of a Christian worldview.

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