

Beyond Foundationalism:
Is a Nonfoundationalist Evangelical Theology Possible?

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In recent years, an increasing number of commentators have sounded warnings that ominous storm clouds are rising on the evangelical theological horizon. They worry that the possibility of outright schism threatens the evangelical coalition. In their attempts to bring to light the growing fissure, concerned observers devise a variety of grids by which to gage the exact nature of the imminent breach in the evangelical ranks. Evangelical theological statesman Millard Erickson, to cite one example, seeks to expose what he sees as the dangerous neo-orthodox tendencies of a group of thinkers he lumps together somewhat superficially as comprising “the evangelical left.” In opposing this group, Erickson styles himself as standing in the evangelical mainstream, as working (perhaps together with certain others) to solidify and transmit the gains made by the post-World War II evangelical vanguard.¹

Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm offer a quite different and potentially more perceptive appraisal. Rather than suggesting that evangelicals are fragmenting over whether or not they should appropriate a reigning theological outlook of a past generation as Erickson does, the two Wheaton College theologians look to a current theological development, postliberalism, for the source of the current parting of ways, which according to Phillips and Okholm divides evangelical theologians into not two, but three distinct groups. On the right are those who follow Carl Henry’s earlier wholesale

rejection of the new movement. The “postconservatives” on the left, according to the authors’ somewhat misleading portrayal, “have linked their proposals with the postliberals.” Phillips and Okholm themselves prefer the group of “moderates” who purportedly establish a common cause with the postliberals while sharply questioning the postliberal agenda.²

A provocative characterization of the menacing division among evangelical theologians is found in a *Christianity Today* essay by Roger Olson. Olson fears that the North American evangelical coalition is splitting into two loose coalitions. The “traditionalists,” on the one hand, uphold “traditional interpretations and formulations as binding and normative” and tend “to look with suspicion upon any doctrinal revisions and new proposals arising out of theological reflection.” “Reformists,” on the other hand, value “the continuing process of constructive theology seeking new light breaking forth from God’s word.”³

Predictions that a potentially devastating theological volcano is about to explode upon the evangelical landscape may turn out to be mere conjecture. Nevertheless, we are living in the midst of a widespread fragmentation affecting all dimensions of Western culture, including the theological enterprise, a situation due in a great measure to the advent of the postmodern ethos. As Princeton theologian J. Wentzel van Huyssteen noted, “Even the briefest overview of our contemporary theological landscape reveals the startling fragmentation caused by what is often called ‘the postmodern challenge’ of our times.”⁴

Despite the potential for oversimplification inherent within any narrowly-focused taxonomy, van Huyssteen’s observation indicates that whatever division may be developing within evangelicalism is best delineated by those, such as Nancey Murphy,⁵ who view the supposed parting of ways as arising largely from how thinkers respond to the postmodern challenge. Many theologians today,

whom may be termed “evangelical modernists,” either discount the significance of the intellectual and cultural changes transpiring in our society, or they view such changes as largely negative. These thinkers advocate that evangelicals maintain the course their forebears charted in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries and developed further in the twentieth, when the heroes of the tradition engaged the questions that arose out of the Enlightenment. “Postmodern evangelicals,” in contrast, believe that Christians ought to take seriously the church’s context within the contemporary cultural milieu. In keeping with this assumption, these thinkers draw insight for their theological work from certain impulses within postmodern writers and their precursors.

One aspect of the emerging postmodern ethos is especially crucial for evangelical theology. We are witnessing a widespread rejection of the foundationalism that characterized the Enlightenment epistemology. In its place, scholars today have embarked on a quest to uncover a nonfoundationalist, or even a postfoundationalist,⁶ approach. The purpose of this essay is to explore this specific dimension of the postmodern condition—the move beyond foundationalism—so as to discern its implications for evangelicals who would engage in the theological enterprise in the postmodern context. To this end, I begin with a look at Enlightenment foundationalism and its impact on modern theology. I then sketch the shift to a nonfoundational epistemology in philosophy and theology. Finally, drawing from the observations gleaned in the first two sections, I offer a basic program that I think might begin to chart the way forward for evangelical theology.

How Firm a Foundation: Enlightenment Foundationalism and Modern Theology

In the modern era, Protestant theologians across the theological spectrum were deeply influenced by the Enlightenment problematic, as well as the solutions proposed by thinkers in the Age of Reason. At the heart of the Enlightenment outlook was a specific understanding of the nature of

human knowledge. This epistemology has often been termed, “foundationalism.”

Modern Epistemological Foundationalism

In its broadest sense, foundationalism is merely the acknowledgment of the seemingly obvious observation that not all beliefs we hold (or assertions we formulate) are on the same level, but that some beliefs (or assertions) anchor others. Stated in the opposite manner, certain of our beliefs (or assertions) receive their support from other beliefs (or assertions) that are more “basic” or “foundational.”⁷ Defined in this manner, nearly every thinker is some sense a foundationalist.

Philosophical foundationalism. In philosophical circles, however, “foundationalism” refers to a much stronger epistemological stance than is entailed in this observation about how beliefs intersect. At the heart of the foundationalist agenda is the desire to overcome the uncertainty generated by our human liability to error and the inevitable disagreements that follow. Foundationalists are convinced that the only way to solve this problem is to find some means of grounding the entire edifice of human knowledge on invincible certainty.⁸ This quest for complete epistemological certitude is often termed “strong” or “classical foundationalism.”

Foundationalist epistemological proposals routinely draw from the metaphor of a building to conceive how human knowledge arises.⁹ According to foundationalists, the acquisition of knowledge ought to proceed in a manner somewhat similar to the construction of a building. Like a physical edifice, knowledge must be built upon a sure foundation. This epistemological foundation consists of either a set of unquestioned beliefs or certain first principles on the basis of which the pursuit of knowledge can proceed. These basic beliefs or first principles are supposedly universal, context-free and available—at least theoretically—to any rational person. The foundationalist’s initial task, then, becomes that of establishing an epistemological foundation for the construction of the human

knowing project by determining, and perhaps even demonstrating, the foundational beliefs or principles upon which knowledge rests. Viewed under the foundationalist rubric, therefore, reasoning moves in only one direction—from the bottom up, that is, from basic beliefs or first principles to resultant conclusions.

Actually, there are three primary aspects to the foundationalist picture of knowledge: the basic or immediate beliefs (or first principles), which form the bedrock undergirding everything else we are justified in believing; the mediate or nonbasic beliefs we derived from these; and the basing relation, that is, the connection between our basic beliefs (or first principles) and our nonbasic beliefs which specifies how the epistemic certainty of basic beliefs can be transferred to nonbasic beliefs.¹⁰ Strong foundationalists demand that the foundations of human knowledge be unshakably certain and assert that the only way this certitude can be transferred to nonbasic beliefs is by the ordinary logical relations of either deduction (such as deducing other truths from innate ideas [e.g., Descartes]) or induction (such as deriving truths from sense impressions caused by the material world [e.g., Locke]).

Finally, in addition to distinguishing between basic and non-basic beliefs, foundationalists generally relegate religious beliefs to the latter status. Hence, foundationalism often moves beyond description—beyond merely describing the difference between basic and non-basic beliefs—to prescription—dictating what sorts of belief are properly basic.¹¹ Similarly, foundationalism becomes a prescription determining what constitutes a correct, acceptable or rightly structured system of beliefs.¹²

Enlightenment foundationalism. The story of the rise of modern foundationalism is well known. Yet, because this epistemological commitment is so ingrained within many evangelical theologians, even to the point of being accepted by many as self-evident, we do well to remind

ourselves of the high points of that narrative.

The problem of error and the quest for epistemological certainty—the quest for a means by which we can justify our claims to knowledge—dates at least to the ancient Greek philosophers. But in Western philosophical history, this difficulty became acute in the Enlightenment. Historians routinely look to the French philosopher Rene Descartes, as the progenitor of modern foundationalism.¹³ In contrast to premodern Western philosophers who tended simply to assume the foundations for philosophical inquiry, Descartes began his philosophical work by attempting to establish that foundation.¹⁴

Descartes lived in troubled times. In the aftermath of the Reformation which had divided “Christ’s seamless garment” and resulted in the Thirty Years War, questions about religion and morality could no longer be settled by appeal to a commonly acknowledged tradition. Further, through his travels Descartes discovered how culturally-based and culturally-dependent beliefs actually are.¹⁵ Descartes’ response to this situation was to seek certitude within the mind of the knowing subject. To accomplish this task, Descartes brought all his beliefs and assumptions under scrutiny. He doubted everything until he arrived at a belief he could not doubt, namely, that he was doubting. This led to his appropriation of the dictum, “I think; therefore, I am.”

In this manner, Descartes claimed to have established the foundations of knowledge by appeal to the mind’s own experience of certainty. On this basis, he began to construct anew the human knowledge edifice. Descartes was convinced that this epistemological program yields knowledge that is certain, culture- and tradition-free, universal, and reflective of a reality that exists outside the mind (this latter being a central feature of a position known as “metaphysical realism” or simply “realism”).

Other philosophers took issue with specific aspects of Descartes’ proposal. John Locke, for

example, rejected Descartes' view that our basic beliefs consist in innate ideas from which we deduce other beliefs. Locke argued that the foundation for human knowledge lies in sense experience, that is, in observations of the world, from which we induce conclusions (a proposal known as empiricism).

Another proposed modification came from the Scottish philosopher, Thomas Reid. Reid pointed out that our psychological constitution draws us irresistibly to accept certain first principles as self-evident. Because we have no reason to suspect that these psychological processes are misleading, he added, we are epistemically entitled to accept and employ these first principles.¹⁶ Reid's proposal (which was to play a crucial role in nineteenth century conservative theology) led to a variant sometimes known as "soft" or "modest foundationalism." According to Jay Wood, "Modest foundationalists make no claims about the invincible certainty of one's basic beliefs or about a need to be reflectively aware of which beliefs have the status of basic. Instead of claiming that one's basic beliefs enjoy infallible certainty, modest foundationists ascribe only prima facie certainty" [that is, such beliefs can be overridden but are acceptable unless one has good reasons for thinking that they have been undermined].¹⁷

Despite disagreements over particulars, however, most Enlightenment thinkers readily adopted Descartes' concern to establish some type of sure foundation for the human knowing project. And with this concern, the Enlightenment project assumed a realist metaphysic and evidenced a strong preference for the correspondence theory of truth, i.e., the epistemological outlook that focuses on the truth value of individual propositions and declares a proposition to be "true" if and only if—or to the extent that—it corresponds with some fact.¹⁸

Foundationalist Theology

The concerns of Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers spilled over the boundaries of

the philosophical guild. Indeed, the foundationalist problematic challenged traditional viewpoints and reformulated thinking in every area of Western society, including theology and religious belief. Soon theologians, swooning under the foundationalist spell, found themselves refashioning the theological edifice in accordance with the newly devised rationalist method.

Enlightenment theology. The foundationalist impulse led thinkers to draw a sharp distinction between "natural religion" –those beliefs that were seemingly demonstrable by reason–and "revealed religion"–the more particular doctrines taught by specific religious communities. As the Age of Reason unfolded, the latter came increasingly under attack, for natural theology–with its more certain foundation in the rationalist method of inquiry–came to enjoy the exalted status of being deemed the true religion. The intellectual highway to the primacy of natural over revealed religion was paved by Locke's revolutionary thesis that when divested of its dogmatic baggage Christianity was the most reasonable form of religion. Other Enlightenment thinkers sought to reduce religion to its most basic elements, which they believed to be universal and therefore reasonable. In the process they constructed a theological alternative to orthodoxy–the deism that played such an important part in the founding of the American republic.

Despite the work of Locke and others, by the time the Age of Reason drew to a close, many intellectuals had abandoned the religion of reason for either skepticism¹⁹ or religious relativism.²⁰ In the end, they concluded, reason is incompetent to answer the great metaphysical questions about God, morality and the meaning of life. Many thinkers in the eighteenth century could see only two cogent alternatives: blindly accepting classical Christian doctrine by appeal to the Bible (or the church) or embracing the skeptical rationalism that seemed to be the final product of the enlightened mind.²¹

Nineteenth century foundationalist theology. In the nineteenth century, however, a new breed of theologians refused to be boxed in by these two options. With the Enlightenment thinkers, they assumed that there was no going behind the quest for certainty introduced by Descartes; there was no return to a seemingly irrational appeal to external religious authority. Still committed to the foundationalist agenda, these thinkers sought a new bedrock upon which to construct the theological house. In the end, the debate as to what might provide the proper foundation for theology netted two basic answers.

For theology's sure foundation, some thinkers looked to religious experience, which although personal in nature is—they thought—nevertheless universally human. The attempt to construct theology on the basis of human religious experience became a specific concern of classical Protestant liberalism. Liberal theologians portrayed the Christian faith in general and Jesus' life and teaching in particular as the fulfillment of humankind's highest religious (or moral) aspirations, aspirations that these thinkers thought they found engraved—albeit perhaps only in embryonic form—in (universal) human nature.

Like their liberal antagonists, conservative theologians also searched for a foundation for theology that could stand firm when subjected to the canons of a supposedly universal human reason. Conservatives came to conclude that this invulnerable foundation lay in an error-free Bible, which they viewed as the storehouse for divine revelation. Hence, the great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge, asserted that the Bible is “free from all error, whether of doctrine, fact, or precept.”²² This inerrant foundation, in turn, could endow with epistemological certitude, at least in theory, the edifice the skilled theological craftsman constructed upon it. For indeed, rather than offering merely a personal opinion on any matter under consideration, the adept theologian claimed that he was only

restating in a more systematic form what Scripture itself “says.”

Conservatives such as Hodge grounded the error-free nature of Scripture in its divinely-inspired character. Nevertheless, many within their ranks boldly asserted that the Bible’s special status as inspired and hence the inerrancy of Scripture could be justified by appeal to rational argument, such as empirical evidence that the Bible contains prophecies which were subsequently fulfilled or that the various facts it presents are completely accurate.

The acceptance of the foundationalist approach, together with the presumed validity of metaphysical realism and the correspondence theory of truth, led conservative theologians to view the theological discipline as a science, understood in the modern sense of the study of “the ordered phenomena which we recognize through the senses.”²³ Charles Hodge, for example, suggested that just as the natural scientist uncovers the facts pertaining to the natural world, so the theologian brings to light the theological facts found within the Bible.²⁴ Conservatives likewise assumed that the theological propositions they drew from the Bible stated universal—even eternal—facts and that the chief goal of theology as an intellectual, scientific discipline was to compile these various facts.

In this way, the firm foundation the hymn writer believed had been laid in God’s “excellent Word” came to be equated with the words of the Bible, the veracity of which was thought to be unimpeachable when measured by the canons of human reason. With such a firm foundation in place, conservative theologians were confident of their ability to complete the task of deducing from Scripture the great, timeless theological truths about God and the world that divine revelation had placed within its pages. In so doing, they believed, they would formulate properly “the faith once delivered to the saints.”

Evangelical Modernists

The foundationalism of Hodge and other nineteenth century conservatives set the tone for what would become the reigning theological paradigm of evangelical theology through most of the twentieth century. Above all, the legacy of the nineteenth century project finds echo among evangelicals in the contemporary rationalist or propositionalist theologians.

My own seminary teachers, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, authors of the impressive three volume *Integrative Theology*, provide a lucid example. Lewis and Demarest maintain that the goal of theology is the amassing of true statements,²⁵ understood as a series of factual propositions.²⁶ The theologian, according to this model, applies the scientific method, assisted by the canons of logic, to the deposit of revelation found in Scripture in an ongoing quest to compile the one, complete, timeless body of right doctrines, formulated as a series of statements or theological assertions, each of which is true in its own right. Similarly, the understanding of the Bible as a compendium of truths unlocked through “scientific” induction, which came to characterize American fundamentalism,²⁷ lives on, when Wayne Grudem defines systematic theology as the attempt to determine what the whole Bible teaches about any given topic.²⁸

Standing behind the propositionalist model of systematic theology, as well as the utility of logic in pursuit of this task, are certain assumptions about the nature of God and humans. Lewis and Demarest articulate the common rationalist viewpoint when they claim that their theological enterprise “assumes (from the argumentation of apologetics and evidence concerning revelation) that God can reveal information to people who are created in his image to think his thoughts after him.”²⁹ The principles of logic, in turn, facilitate the human process of thinking God’s thoughts because these principles, which evangelical modernists assume to be universal, are “rooted ultimately in the mind and nature of the Creator.”³⁰

The results of the rationalist, propositionalist theological method have been astounding. Through the use of the tools of Enlightenment reason, evangelical modernists standing in the tradition of Charles Hodge, have constructed impressive systems of Christian doctrine. These works have assisted an entire generation of evangelical apologists in responding to the challenge posed by the secularist world view of late modernity. By constructing systematic theologies that focus on the propositional content of the faith and offer a logical presentation of Christian doctrine, evangelical theologians have artfully demonstrated the credibility of Christianity to a culture that glorifies reason and deifies science.

This culture was perhaps the sole milieu of the Western church throughout much of the twentieth century. Our intellectual context, however, is shifting dramatically. And this development has crucial implications for evangelical theology.

How Infirm the Foundation: Theology After Foundationalism

Foundationalism, allied as it was with metaphysical realism and the correspondence theory of truth, was undeniably the epistemological king of the post-Enlightenment, modern era. But it no longer commands the broad, unquestioned acceptance it once enjoyed. In fact, among philosophers today, foundationalism is in dramatic retreat.³¹ Merold Westphal observes, “That it is philosophically indefensible is so widely agreed that its demise is the closest thing to a philosophical consensus in decades.”³² Wentzel van Huyssteen concurs: “Whatever notion of postmodernity we eventually opt for, all postmodern thinkers see the modernist quest for certainty, and the accompanying program of laying foundations for our knowledge, as a dream for the impossible, a contemporary version of the quest for the Holy Grail.”³³ And Nicholas Wolterstorff offers this sobering conclusion: “On all fronts foundationalism is in bad shape. It seems to me there is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill

and learn to live in its absence.”³⁴

The Quest for an Alternative Epistemology

Modern foundationalism has been the target of criticism since its genesis. Yet as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, certain philosophers, aware of the short-comings of the Enlightenment epistemological agenda, became increasingly earnest in seeking a cogent alternative. For reasons we need not recount here,³⁵ these thinkers questioned the foundationalist assumption of the necessity of establishing the first principles of philosophy prior to engaging in the construction of knowledge, as well as the preoccupation with the quest for unassailable basic beliefs. And they rejected the attendant understanding of truth as the correspondence of individual assertions with the world, each of which—in the words of one critic of foundationalism—is thought to be “true per se absolutely and unalterably.”³⁶

Two alternatives emerged almost simultaneously: coherentism and pragmatism. At the heart of coherentism is the suggestion that the justification for a belief lies in its “fit” with other held beliefs;³⁷ hence, justification entails “inclusion within a coherent system,” to cite the words of philosopher Arthur Kenyon Rogers.³⁸ But what does it mean for a belief to cohere with other beliefs? Of course, non-contradiction must be an aspect of any coherence of beliefs. Coherentists, however, suggest that the “fitting together” of beliefs entails more than merely that the various assertions do not contradict each other. In addition, the corpus of beliefs must be interconnected in some way. In other words, rather than remaining a collection or aggregate of disjointed, discrete members that have nothing whatsoever to do with one another, the set of beliefs must form an integrated whole, and this whole must carry “explanatory power.”

Coherentists, therefore, reject the foundationalist assumption that a justified set of beliefs

necessarily comes in the form of an edifice resting on a base. In their estimation, the base/superstructure distinction is erroneous, for no beliefs are intrinsically basic, and none are intrinsically superstructure.³⁹ Instead, beliefs are interdependent, each belief being supported by its connection to its neighbors and ultimately to the whole.⁴⁰ Rather than picturing human knowledge as a building, coherentists draw from the image of a network, in which beliefs come together to form an integrated belief system. Hence, knowledge is a “web of belief” (Quine⁴¹) or a “conceptual scheme” (Davidson). In addition, whereas foundationalists tend to focus on the task of determining the truth value of each assertion independently of the others, coherentists find truth in the interconnectedness of beliefs. Truth is primarily a predicate of the belief system as a whole. Hence, the turn-of-the-century philosopher Harold H. Joachim criticizes the Cartesians for their preoccupation with what he describes as “the smallest and most abstracted fragment of knowledge, a mere mutilated shred torn from the living whole in which alone it possessed its significance.” For him, the “ideal of knowledge...is a system, not of *truths*, but of *truth*.”⁴² Consequently, for coherentists, the quest for knowledge entails a “research program” (Lakatos), in which advances occur through “paradigm shifts” (Kuhn).

Despite this shift in emphasis, many modern coherentists remain committed to the quest for epistemological certainty. In fact, they embrace coherentism because they believe this approach provides a greater possibility of justifying beliefs. A. K. Rogers voices this illuminating appraisal:

Mere logic never by any possibility can add more certainty to the conclusion than existed in the premises. Its ideal, is, therefore, to carry back proof to more and more general premises, until at last it finds something in its own right on which it can rest, and from which then a derivative certainty passes to the consequences. The idea of *system*, on the contrary, implies

that certainty grows continually as new facts are added. . . .The conclusions, that is, have to be more certain than the premises. And the possibility of this depends, not on logical deduction from what is self-evident, but on a *coincidence* of evidence. In other words, when we see that two independent beliefs corroborate one another, the confidence we have in both is increased; and this is what we mean by their intellectual justification. For this to happen, logical processes are required, because to reinforce one another the two must come in contact in a connected system. But the essence of the validation lies not in the passing on of an equal measure of certainty due to the process of inference, but to the *increase* of certainty due to the confluence of evidence.⁴³

At the same time, some coherentists acknowledge that rather than a present reality, absolute justification of beliefs belongs to the realm of the ideal. Yet this does not mean that the unattainable ideal is any less real. Against those who argue that “finite experience is solid and fully real and clearly conceivable, an unshaken *datum* here and now; and that we must accept it without question,” Joachim advocates a reversal in understanding: “In our view it is the ideal which is solid and substantial and fully actual. The finite experiences are rooted in the ideal. They share its actuality, and draw from it whatever being and conceivability they possess.”⁴⁴ Thus, the coherentist move away from foundationalism entailed a shift not only from the part to the whole, but also from the actual to the ideal.

Turn-of-the-century coherentists were joined in their critique of foundationalism by the pragmatists. At first glance “pragmatism” may suggest nothing more than that truth is simply “what works,” however the term may be understood. The modern pragmatist philosophers, especially Charles Peirce (1839-1914), however, had a specific understanding in view. In their estimation, the

truth of any belief ought to be measured according to the belief's success in advancing "factual inquiry" (that is, "the activity aimed at the discovery of truth").⁴⁵ The pragmatists' innovation, according to Arthur E. Murphy's judgment, was "[t]heir insistence that the meaning and worth of ideas is rightly judged, not by their conformity to a 'reality' set up in advance as the final standard of truth and reasonableness, but by the way they function in the context of responsible inquiry."⁴⁶

Pragmatists such as Peirce did not differ significantly with the foundationalists about the goal of inquiry. Nor did he reject the reigning metaphysical realism of the day. Rather, Peirce's pragmatism was largely an attempt to clarify the method of scientific advance. In his estimation, truth emerges as we engage in prediction followed by testing, observation and experimental confirmation. And in contrast to the here-and-now individualism of the Cartesian method, this process requires both a long-term horizon and the cooperative contributions of a community of scientific investigators. Peirce offers this lucid definition: "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real."⁴⁷

As this remark suggests, although Peirce held to the objectivity of truth and the existence of reality independent of our subjectivity, he nevertheless posited an important connection between that reality and the human pursuit of truth: "the reality of that which is real does depend on the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in it."⁴⁸ Yet, he rejected the suggestion that this conclusion makes reality dependent on thought. Peirce explains: "the answer to this is that, on the one hand, reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it; and that, on the other hand, though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks."⁴⁹

William James explicitly advocated the connection between truth and the epistemological process implicit in Peirce: “Truth for us is simply a collective name for verification-processes, just as health, wealth, strength, etc. are names for other processes connected with life, and also pursued because it pays to pursue them. Truth is *made*, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience.”⁵⁰ In fact, James suggests that the pragmatists’ central departure from the foundationalists lies precisely here. In his estimation, “the great assumption of the intellectualists [i.e., foundationalists] is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you’ve got your true idea of anything, there’s an end of the matter. You’re in possession; you *know*; you have fulfilled your thinking destiny.” For the pragmatist James, in contrast, “The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.”⁵¹

If coherentism and pragmatism provided ways to leave behind the foundationalist preference for the correspondence of truth, the “turn to linguistics” offered the means to overcome metaphysical realism. Peirce himself was keenly interested in semiotics and language theory. But more significant for the quest for a nonfoundationalist epistemology via a turn to linguistics was the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). In a sense, Wittgenstein completed the shift toward belief systems and the communal dimension of truth pioneered by the coherentists and the pragmatists.

Midway in his career, Wittgenstein came to realize that rather than having only a single purpose—to make assertions or state facts—language has many functions (e.g., to offer prayer, make requests and convey ceremonial greetings). This discovery led to Wittgenstein's important concept of “language games.” According to Wittgenstein, each use of language occurs within a separate and seemingly self-contained system complete with its own rules. Similar to playing a game, we require an awareness of the operative rules and significance of the terms within the context of the purpose

for which we are using language. Each use of language, therefore, comprises a separate "language game." And each "game" may have little to do with the other "language games."⁵²

Like the move to coherence or pragmatism, adopting the image of "language games" entailed abandoning the correspondence theory of truth. But unlike that earlier move it also opened the door for the questioning of metaphysical realism. For Wittgenstein, meaning and truth are not related—at least not directly or primarily—to an external world of "facts" waiting to be apprehended. Instead, they are an internal function of language. Because the meaning of any statement is dependent on the context—that is, on the "language game"—in which it appears, any sentence has as many meanings as contexts in which it is used. Rather than assertions of final truth or truth in any ultimate sense, all our utterances can only be deemed "true" within the context in which they are spoken.⁵³ Further, viewing language as a "game" presumes that language does not have its genesis in the individual mind grasping a truth or fact about the world and then expressing it in statements. Rather, language is a social phenomenon, and any statement acquires its meaning within the process of social interaction.

Theology after Foundationalism

The Enlightenment quest for certitude served as a powerful mold of theology in the modern era. In recent years, however, several theologians have been looking to the insights of the nonfoundationalist philosophers in an effort to recast theology after the demise of foundationalism. Two of these theologians provide helpful models as to what a nonfoundational theological method might look like. In so doing they provide impulses for an evangelical theological engagement with the postmodern context.

Pannenberg and coherence. Perhaps no theologian has exemplified more clearly the application to theology of the non-correspondence epistemological theories of the modern

coherentists and pragmatists than my own *Doktorvater*, Wolfhart Pannenberg.⁵⁴ At the heart of Pannenberg's theological agenda is the task of demonstrating the internal coherence of the doctrines and the external coherence of Christian doctrine with all knowledge.⁵⁵

Pannenberg acknowledges that coherence is not a new idea in theological history. The scholastic theologians were concerned to show the truth of Christian doctrine through a presentation of its internal and external coherence. But he criticizes the tendency of the scholastic tradition—especially its Protestant form—to reduce the role of reason to that of illuminating truth already presupposed from revelation disclosed through what was assumed to be an inspired Bible.⁵⁶ Such a move, he maintains, led to several misguided tendencies. The scholastics unwittingly divided truth into autonomous spheres, attempted to shield the truth content of the Christian tradition from rational inquiry, and ended up placing the Bible in contradiction to every new discovery of truth, rather than integrating scientific discoveries into the truth claim of the Christian faith. In short, the doctrine of biblical inspiration failed to facilitate theologians in demonstrating the coherence of Christian doctrine with human knowledge.

Even more devastating, in Pannenberg's estimation, has been the proposal of what he refers to as “neo-Protestantism” (e.g., pietism and liberalism) that places the focus of revelation in the act of faith itself.⁵⁷ In his estimation, this approach leads to a subjectivist understanding of truth which too easily borders on irrational fanaticism and ultimately fosters an unbiblical independence of the believing subject. Rather than being merely subjective, Pannenberg argues that truth is universal. Any valid “personal truth” must be, at least in principle, true for all. Pannenberg's task, therefore, is to chart a pathway that carries greater promise than either of the widely-held alternatives.

The basis for Pannenberg's reformulation of a coherentist theological method lies in his

understanding of truth. Although he shares the older theological goal of discovering universal truth, he rejects the concept of truth the medieval scholastics inherited from the Greek philosophical tradition, namely, that truth is found in the constant and unchanging essences—or the eternal presence—lying behind the flow of time.⁵⁸ Rather, reminiscent of modern coherentists and pragmatists but drawing squarely on what he sees as the biblical view, Pannenberg argues that truth is essentially historical. Truth is what shows itself throughout the movement of time climaxing in the end event.⁵⁹ This end, he adds, is anticipated in the present, a point Pannenberg finds evident in general human life, for we continually modify our understandings in the light of subsequent experience.

At this point, Pannenberg applies the classical Augustinian linking of truth with God to his own dynamic view of the nature of truth: The truth that emerges in the end is the truth of God,⁶⁰ who is “the reality that determines everything.”⁶¹ Consequently, all truth ultimately comes together in God, who is the ground of the unity of truth. This, in turn, leads a coherentist theological method. For Pannenberg, the goal of theology is to demonstrate the unity of truth in God, that is, to bring all human knowledge together in our affirmation of God. Or stated in another way, theology seeks to show how the postulate of God illumines all human knowledge.⁶²

Such an enterprise, however, is impossible to accomplish. The reality of God remains an open question in the contemporary world. And our human knowledge is never complete or absolutely certain. To respond to this problem, Pannenberg appeals to the eschatological nature of truth and to the scientific nature of theology. Because truth is historical, the focal point of certitude can only be the eschatological future. Only then will we know truth in its absolute fullness. Until the eschaton, truth will by its own nature always remain provisional and truth claims contestable.⁶³

This suggests that theological statements, like all human assertions, are hypotheses to be

tested.⁶⁴ And we test our theological assertions as we seek to determine their internal and external coherence. In a manner resembling the modern pragmatists, therefore, Pannenberg maintains that the question of truth must be answered in the process of theological reflection and reconstruction. And like they, he remains optimistic about the ongoing quest to discover truth. Pannenberg is convinced that this testing process will confirm the power of the assertion of the reality of God to illumine the totality of human knowledge.

Lindbeck and community ground rules. Pannenberg draws from a coherentist approach in his attempt to carve out a theological method that is nonfoundational, yet committed to a realist metaphysic. What would theology look like if it not only rejected the correspondence theory of truth, but sought to follow Wittgenstein and move beyond realism as well? The program outlined by George Lindbeck provides a clue.

Similar to Pannenberg, Lindbeck's primary goal is to carve out an alternative to two rival, but in his estimation equally discredited conceptions of doctrine, both of which are in the end the results of the application of foundationalism to theological method. He terms these two the "cognitive-propositionalist" and the "experiential-expressive" approaches. The former erroneously assumes that theological statements (doctrines) make first-order truth claims (that is, they assert that something is objectively true or false), thereby identifying religion too closely with its cognitive dimension. The latter sees doctrines as the outward expressions of the "inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations"⁶⁵ related to personal religious experience, but in the process erroneously assumes that there is some identifiable core experience common to all Christian traditions or even to all world religions.

Lindbeck's intent is to offer a third view, which he calls the "cultural-linguistic" approach. To

this end, he not only follows the coherentist pathway but also reacquisitions Wittgenstein and gives to coherentism a Wittgensteinian twist. Lindbeck declares that doctrines are like rules of grammar. They constitute what we might call the rules of discourse of the believing community. Doctrines act as norms which instruct adherents how to think about, and live in the world. Hence, like rules of grammar, church doctrine has a "regulative" function, serving as "community authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action."⁶⁶ They are "teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group." As such "they indicate what constitutes faithful adherence to a community."⁶⁷ In short, Christian doctrines establish the ground rules for the "game" of Christian thinking, speaking and living.

Lindbeck's use of Wittgenstein has far-reaching implications for the concept of truth. He notes that rules of grammar are routinely stated in the form of propositions; nevertheless, asking whether any one of them is objectively "true" or "false" involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the type of proposition the rule in fact is. It entails ripping the assertion out of its context and treating it apart from its regulative role within the language itself. These rules are not intended to say anything true about a reality external to the language they regulate. Hence, each rule is only "true" in the context of the body of rules that govern the language to which the rules belong. Lindbeck suggests that we might view doctrinal statements in a similar manner. Seen from this perspective, such statements do not make "first-order" truth-claims; they do not assert something objective about reality. Instead, like rules of grammar, they are second-order assertions. This suggests that church doctrines are primarily rules for speech about God, rather than actual assertions concerning God.⁶⁸ Hence, they make "intrasystematic" truth-claims.⁶⁹ Doctrines are "true" primarily as "parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting."⁷⁰

His “third way” leads Lindbeck to call for an “intratextual theology” which “re-describes reality within the scriptural framework” and aims at “imaginatively incorporating all being into a Christ-centered world.”⁷¹ This theology draws from the text to explore what it means to articulate and live out the community's vision within a specific time and place.⁷² Similar to Pannenberg, Lindbeck concludes that to this end, the theologian expounds the doctrinal core or framework of the Christian faith, determines that it coheres within itself, and indicates how doctrine illumines human existence.

Affirming a (Non)Foundation: Toward a Post-foundationalist Theology

Despite the century-old critique of foundationalism and the theological proposals of contemporary thinkers like Pannenberg and Lindbeck, foundationalist theology is not dead, especially among evangelicals. On the contrary, a large cadre of evangelical modernists appear content to engage in theology in a manner that presupposes the older foundationalist epistemology.

At the same time, however, a growing number of evangelicals are becoming cognizant of the demise of foundationalism in philosophy and are increasingly concerned to explore the implications of this demise for theology. They believe that theology must take seriously the postmodern critique of Enlightenment foundationalism and must capitalize on the attempts of philosophers to formulate nonfoundationalist alternatives. Convinced that the quest to move beyond foundationalism is crucial for evangelical theology, they draw insights for their own work from the emerging nonfoundationalist theorists.

But in what sense, or to what extent, can the evangelical theological task incorporate a nonfoundationalist epistemology? How can the descendants of Charles Hodge and Gordon Lewis draw as well from the work of thinkers like Wolfhart Pannenberg and George Lindbeck in an attempt to develop a truly evangelical theological method in the postmodern context?

Reconstructing the Foundation

I noted earlier that the fundamental idea of foundationalism is that certain beliefs anchor other beliefs, i.e., certain beliefs are “basic,” and other beliefs arise as conclusions from them. Enlightenment foundationalism, however, took the matter a step farther. “Strong” foundationalists relegated religious beliefs to a non-basic status and sought to gain epistemological certitude by discovering an unassailable foundation of basic beliefs upon which to construct the knowledge edifice.

Recently several evangelical philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, have questioned strong foundationalism while not rejecting the basic foundationalist insight. These thinkers join other nonfoundationalists in claiming—against the Enlightenment—that there is no universal human reason. There is no single, universal set of criteria by means of which we can judge definitively the epistemic status of all beliefs.⁷³ Further, according to Plantinga and Wolterstorff reason is not the supposedly neutral medium in which human reflection takes place. Nor is it a purely formal and autonomous given that precedes, and gives shape to, intellectual reflection. Instead, they argue, that reason is “person specific” and “situation specific,”⁷⁴ and that the nature of reason is itself a disputed topic.⁷⁵

At the same time, these thinkers, whose viewpoint is sometimes referred to as “Reformed epistemology,”⁷⁶ do not deny categorically the validity of the foundationalist search for basic beliefs. Indeed, they agree that certain beliefs are basic. What they reject as arbitrary and indefensible is the Enlightenment foundationalist restriction on which beliefs can count as properly basic, a restriction that assigns religious beliefs to the realm of superstructure. The Reformed epistemologists, in contrast, claim unequivocally that belief in God ought at times to be viewed as properly basic.⁷⁷

The work of the Reformed epistemologists raises the question as to what—if anything—might

be deemed basic for Christian theology: Does theological reflection and construction build upon something that we must presuppose? For the answer, these philosophers, like other nonfoundationalists, point to the believing community. (In fact, this is in part what makes Reformed epistemology's seemingly weak brand of foundationalism at the same time nonfoundationalist and decidedly postmodern.) Thinkers such as Plantinga and Wolterstorff acknowledge the inevitability of our being situated in a particular community and the indispensable role our respective communities (or traditions) play in shaping our conceptions of rationality, as well as the religious beliefs we deem basic and thus by appeal to which we test new claims. And they readily admit the attendant loss of certitude involved with this acknowledgment, for they realize that these various communities may disagree as to the relevant set of paradigm instances of basic beliefs.

The difficulty this poses for any claims to universal truth ought not to be overlooked. Nevertheless, the communitarian turn marks an important advance. This focus returns theological reflection to its proper primary location within the believing community, in contrast to the Enlightenment ideal that effectively took theology out of the church and put it in the academy. More specifically, nonfoundationalist approaches see Christian theology as an activity of the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ. This has far-reaching implications for evangelical theology.

Despite their differences, evangelicals share a common vision as to what it means to be the Christ-focused community. Most evangelicals would agree that at the heart of evangelicalism is an emphasis on an experience of being encountered savingly in Jesus Christ by the God of the Bible. This encounter is an identity-producing event. Through Christ, God constitutes us individually as believers and corporately as a community of believers. As a result, evangelicals are story-tellers; we readily recite our "personal testimonies"—narratives that recount our historical and ongoing personal

encounter with God. And these are cast in the categories drawn from the biblical narrative, as well as its explication in the didactic sections of Scripture. As evangelicals, therefore, we have come to see the story of God's action in Christ as the paradigm for our stories. We share an identity-constituting narrative.

This elevation of the role of experience ought not to be confused with the older Protestant liberalism, however. Two aspects separate the evangelical ethos as delineated here from the liberal project. First, as we noted earlier liberalism transformed religious experience into a new foundationalism. Liberal theologians assumed—and sought to discern—a single, universal, foundational religious experience that supposedly lay beneath the plethora of religious experiences found in the various religious traditions. Rather than following liberalism in this direction, the evangelical ethos as I understand it asserts that the various religions mediate religious experiences that are categorically different from each other. The encounter with the God of the Bible through Jesus, which is foundational to Christian identity, is shared only by those who participate in the Christian community (even though the experience is *potentially* universal, in that all persons might conceivably embrace the Christian faith). In fact, the commonality of this experience is the identifying feature of participation in this specific community, whereas a quite different experience would mark a person as a member of some other community.

Second (and providing the theoretical basis for the first), the evangelical ethos articulated here takes seriously the experience-forming dimension of interpretive frameworks. As Lindbeck has pointed out, the older liberal project tended to give primacy to experience and to view theological statements as expressions of religious experience. But this approach misunderstands the nature of experience. Experience does not precede interpretation. Rather experiences are always filtered by an

interpretive framework—a grid—that facilitates their occurrence.⁷⁸ Hence, religious experience is dependent on a cognitive framework that sets forth a specifically religious interpretation of the world. In this sense, Lindbeck is correct in saying that religions produce religious experience rather than merely being the expression of it.

But we must take this move away from classical liberalism a step farther. There is no generic religious experience, only experiences endemic to specific religious traditions—experiences the occurrences of which are facilitated by an interpretive framework that is specific to that religious tradition. And any such interpretive framework is theological in nature, for it involves an understanding of the world that sees the world in connection with the divine reality around which that tradition focuses. More specifically, Christian experience is facilitated by the proclamation of the Christian gospel, inherent in which is a specifically Christian theological interpretive framework, a “grid” that views the world in connection with the God of the Bible.

Christian theology, in turn, is an intellectual enterprise by and for the Christian community, in which the community of those whom the God of the Bible has encountered in Jesus Christ seeks to understand, clarify and delineate the community’s interpretive framework as informed by the narrative of the action of this God on behalf of all creation as revealed in the Bible. In this sense, we might say that the specifically Christian experience-facilitating interpretative framework, arising as it does out of the biblical narrative, is “basic” for Christian theology.

Re-forming the Mosaic

At first glance, the suggestion that the Christian interpretive framework is “basic” for theology might appear to be simply a return to Enlightenment foundationalism. In fact, however, it marks a radical departure from the Enlightenment, while maintaining the central concerns of

foundationalism. The cognitive framework that is “basic” for theology is not a given that precedes the theological enterprise; it does not provide the sure foundation upon which the theological edifice can in turn be constructed. Rather, in a sense the interpretive framework and theology are inseparably intertwined. Just as every interpretive framework is essentially theological, so also every articulation of the Christian cognitive framework comes already clothed in a specific theological understanding. In fact, every such articulation is the embodiment of a specific understanding of the Christian theological vision; each embodies a specific understanding of the world as it is connected to the God of the Bible.

The theologian’s task, then, is not to work from an interpretive framework to a theological construct. Instead, the theological enterprise consists in setting forth in a systematic manner a properly Christian interpretive framework as informed by the Bible for the sake of the mission of the church in the contemporary context. By its very nature, the systematic articulation of the Christian interpretive framework takes the form of an integrated statement of Christian doctrine. This leads inevitably to the kind of coherentist theological method Pannenberg has pioneered.

Commitment to the foundationalist approach takes most evangelical modernists, in contrast, in a quite different direction. Despite what we might surmise from the systems of Christian doctrine they produce, evangelical modernists routinely approach theological reflection in a somewhat piecemeal manner, indicative of an understanding of knowledge that sees it as the compiling of correct conclusions from a sure foundation. Indeed, once a theologian has set forth the proper foundation (which for the evangelical modernist is often focused in an inerrant Bible), he or she is free to construct the house of theological knowledge in any order. As a consequence, the systematic theologies of evangelical modernists often give the appearance of being elaborate collections of

loosely related facts derived from the Bible which is understood as “a store-house of facts,” to cite Charles Hodge’s description.⁷⁹ Rather than *systematic* theologies, they tend to be what we might call “encyclopedias of theological knowledge.” And even though the treatment of the various topics in these exhaustive works generally follows a customary pattern—a pattern that has a certain logic to it—evangelical modernists often admit that the chosen order is in fact quite arbitrary. Wayne Grudem, for example, writes:

there is nothing to prevent us from going to Scripture to look for answers to *any* doctrinal questions, considered in *any sequence*. The sequence of topics in this book is a very common one and has been adopted because it is orderly and lends itself well to learning and teaching. But the chapters could be read in any sequence one wanted and the conclusions should not be different, nor should the persuasiveness of the arguments—if they are rightly derived from Scripture—be significantly diminished....I have tried to write the chapters so that they can be read as independent units.⁸⁰

Of course, Grudem can only release the reader to read the chapters in any sequence, because in the book’s prolegomenon he has first set forth the proper foundation for what follows.

The demise of foundationalism, however, raises questions about the propriety of this paradigm. As I noted earlier, contemporary philosophers remind us that knowledge is not a collection of isolated factual statements arising directly from first principles. Rather, our beliefs form a system in which each belief is supported by its neighbors and, ultimately, by its presence within the whole. If this is the case, theology can no longer model itself after the foundationalist metaphor of constructing an edifice. We cannot spin our wheels constructing elaborate prolegomena, thinking thereby we have laid a sure foundation for the compilation of seemingly separable units of biblical

teaching we then elaborate. Instead, we ought to view Christian doctrine as comprising a “web of belief” and see theology, in turn, as the exploration of Christian doctrine viewed as an interrelated, unified whole. And we ought to envision our constructive work as leading to a mosaic of interlocking pieces that presents a single pattern, rather than merely to a collection of beads on a string.

Therefore, while we might view the Christian interpretive framework as in a certain sense foundational for theology, we could more properly speak of theology as the articulation of the cognitive “mosaic” of the Christian faith. This “mosaic” consists of the interlocking doctrines which together comprise the specifically Christian way of viewing the world. This world view is truly theological and specifically Christian, because it involves an understanding of the entire universe and of ourselves in connection with the God of the Bible and the biblical narrative of God at work bringing creation to its divinely destined goal. Not only does the theological task entail explicating this doctrinal mosaic, however, but as Pannenberg has argued, it also includes demonstrating the explicative power of the Christian faith by indicating the interconnectedness of the set of doctrines and the value of the Christian world view for illuminating human experience, as well as our human understanding of our world.

Reconstructing the World

I noted earlier that the nonfoundationalist move to a communitarian theological method opens the door to a potentially devastating problem: How can we seek truth in a multicultural world in which various communities offer diverse theological paradigms? Stated in other words, Does theology speak about anything objective, or does it content itself with merely articulating the interpretive framework of a specific religious tradition?

Lindbeck’s proposal provides a lucid example of how this problem can arise in a

nonfoundationalist theology. His claim that theological statements are second-order assertions and his close linking of doctrine with the construction of a coherent vision of the world seem to beg the sticky question as to whether such assertions and such a vision somehow reflect a reality beyond themselves.⁸¹ Further, his suggestion that theological assertions are “in house” statements potentially results in a "sectarian" church—one that no longer assumes any role in the public realm.⁸² In short, Lindbeck’s program raises the question, Does the move to nonfoundationalism entail a move away from metaphysical realism?⁸³

Formulated in this manner, the question is both improper and ultimately unhelpful. Perhaps we might better ask, “How can a nonfoundationalist theological method lead us to statements about a world beyond our formulations?” Here we can take our cue from contemporary sociologists who provide insight into the world-constructing role of society in general and language in particular.

Although Wittgenstein introduced the phrase "language game" into popular parlance, the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), provided the basis for the turn to linguistics. In contrast to his predecessors who viewed language as a natural phenomenon that develops according to fixed and discoverable laws, Saussure proposed that a language is a social phenomenon⁸⁴ and that a linguistic system is a product of social convention.⁸⁵ Structuralists, such as the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (b. 1908), built on Saussure’s insight. Their efforts, as well as the work of the proponents of what has come to be known as “the sociology of knowledge,” netted an awareness of the connection between culture (including language) and both personal identity formation and social cohesion.⁸⁶

Culture generates a shared context in which a people engage in the construction of meaning and in the task of making sense out of the world. In the words of Raymond Williams, culture

functions as a “*signifying system* through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.”⁸⁷ In this process, language plays a crucial role. Together with non-linguistic modalities, such as metaphorical images and symbols, language—which we inherit from our social community—provides the conceptual tools through which we construct the world we inhabit, as well as the vehicles through which we communicate and thereby share meaning with others. In the words of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, “Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge.”⁸⁸ Theology, we might conclude, explores the world-constructing, knowledge-forming, identity-forming “language” of the Christian community.

But how does this relate to an objective reality beyond our linguistic constructs? There is, of course, a certain undeniable givenness to the universe apart from the human linguistic-constructive task. Indeed, the universe predates the appearance of humans upon the earth. To assume that this observation is sufficient to relegate all the talk of social construction to the trash heap, however, is to miss the point. The simple fact is, we do not inhabit the “world-in-itself”; instead, we live in a linguistic world of our own making. As Berger and Luckmann note, human reality is “socially constructed reality.”⁸⁹

At the same time, viewed from a Christian perspective, there is a certain “objectivity” to the world. But this objectivity is not that of a static reality existing outside of, and co-temporally with, our socially and linguistically constructed reality; it is not the objectivity of what some might call “the world as it is.” Rather, seen through the lenses of the gospel, this objectivity is the objectivity of the world as God wills it to be. Because God wills is not a present, but a future reality (e.g., Isa. 65:17-

19; Rev. 21:5), the “objectivity of the world” about which we can truly speak is an objectivity of a *future*, eschatological world. And because this future reality is God’s determined will for creation, as that which cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:26-28) it is far more real—more objectively real—than the present world, which is even now passing away (1 Cor. 7:31).

This observation has crucial implications for theology. As the community of Christ, we have a divinely-given mandate: to be participants in God’s work of constructing a world that reflects God’s own will for creation, a world in which everything finds its connectedness in Jesus Christ (Col. 1:17) who is the *logos*, the ordering principle of the cosmos as God intends it to be. This mandate has a strongly linguistic dimension. We participate with God as through the constructive power of language we create a world that links our present with the divine future—or, I should say, as the Holy Spirit creates such a world in, among and through us. In this ongoing world-constructing process, the Spirit’s primary tool is the biblical narrative. The Spirit’s goal is to bring us to view all reality in accordance with God’s program in molding creation into conformity with the divine eternal purpose through Jesus Christ, the Son, so that as the community of Christ we might inhabit a world that truly reflects God’s purposes for creation. Because this program is in part linguistic, participating in it is theological work!

The fundamental question, however, still remains: Why give primacy to the world-constructing language of the Christian community? As evangelical Christians we would likely respond by asserting that we believe that the Christian theological vision is *true*. But on what basis can we make this claim? Must we now finally appeal to some court beyond the Christian faith itself, some rational “first principle” that supposedly carries universality? In the end, must we inevitably retreat to a foundationalist epistemology?

Here, I think, the wedding of communitarian and pragmatist insights offers assistance. Communitarians remind us that the goal of all social traditions is to construct a well-ordered society, although the various communities might well differ from each other as to what that society entails. This observation leads us to inquire as to which theological vision is able to provide the transcendent vision for the construction of the kind of world that particular theologizing community is in fact seeking? Which theological vision provides the foundation for the construction of true community? We believe that the Christian vision, focused as it is on God as the triunity of persons and humankind as created to be the *image dei*, sets forth more completely the nature of community that all religious belief systems in their own way and according to their own understanding seek to foster. This vision, we maintain, provides the best transcendent basis for the human ideal of life-in-relationship, for it looks to the divine life as a plurality-in-unity as the basis for understanding what it means to be human persons-in-community.

The task of systematic theology is to show how the Christian mosaic of beliefs offers a transcendent vision of the glorious eschatological community God wills for God's own creation and how this vision provides a coherent foundation for life-in-relationship in this penultimate age, which life ought to be visible in the community of Christ as the sign of the age to come. Implicit in the construction of a coherent presentation of the Christian vision is a claim to "validity," a claim which, however, does not look to a universally-accessible present reality for confirmation, but awaits the eschatological completion of the universally-directed program of the God of the Bible.

Notes

1. Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); *Postmodernizing the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998).
2. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, "The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 14-15.
3. Roger E. Olson, "The Future of Evangelical Theology," *Christianity Today* (February 9, 1998): 41.
4. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," *Theology Today* 55/2 (July, 1998): 213.
5. Nancey C. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 90. See also, Stanley J. Grenz, "An Agenda for Evangelical Theology in the Postmodern Context," *Didaskalia* 9/2 (Spring 1998): 1-16.
6. Hence, van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology."
7. For this basic definition, see, for example, W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 78-79.
8. Wood, *Epistemology*, 84.
9. For the use of this metaphor in Descartes' writings, see Descartes, *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23, 24, 26-27, 76, 80.
10. This is delineated in Wood, *Epistemology*, 84.
11. Merold Westphal, "A Reader's Guide to 'Reformed Epistemology,'" *Perspectives* 7/9 (November 1992): 10-11.
12. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Faith and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 48.
13. See, for example, Wood, *Epistemology*, 79.
14. See, for example, John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 4.

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15. Descartes, *Discourse on Method in Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (New York: Dover, 1955), 1:90-91
16. Wood, *Epistemology*, 100.
17. Wood, *Epistemology*, 98.
18. Bede Rundle, "correspondence theory of truth," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford, 1995), 166.
19. David Hume was the exemplar of enlightened skepticism. For a discussion of this development, see Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant* (London: Duckworth, 1911), 230-251.
20. Paradigmatic was the position of Gotthold Lessing. For a summary of Lessing's views, see William C. Platcher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 249-50.
21. See, for example, McGiffert's conclusion. McGiffert, *Protestant Thought Before Kant*, 253.
22. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, three volumes (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1872), 1:152.
23. For a discussion of this definition, formulated by Charles Hodge but indicative of other nineteenth century conservatives, see George Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality*, 245-47.
24. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:18.
25. See, for example, Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, three volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 1:25.
26. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 26-27.
27. See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 98.
28. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 21.
29. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:27.
30. Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1:33.
31. For this judgment, see Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, 37.

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32. Westphal, "Reader's Guide," 11.
33. van Huyssteen, "Tradition and the Task of Theology," 216.
34. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 52.
35. For a helpful summary of the arguments against foundationalism, see Wood, *Epistemology*, 88-98. For an early twentieth century critique of the correspondence theory of truth by a sympathetic critic who does not reject the theory completely, see Charles A. Campbell, *Scepticism and Construction* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931), 82-96.
36. Harold H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906, 1939), 72.
37. Wood, *Epistemology*, 114.
38. Arthur Kenyon Rogers, *What Is Truth?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1923), 12.
39. Jonathan Dancy, "epistemology, problems of," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford, 1995), 246.
40. Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, 94.
41. See, for example, W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House, 1970).
42. Harold H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1906, 1939), 73, 72.
43. Rogers, *What Is Truth?* 12-13 (italics in original).
44. Joachim, *Nature of Truth*, 82.
45. Arthur E. Murphy, *The Uses of Reason* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 87.
46. Murphy, *Uses of Reason*, 85-86.
47. Charles Sanders Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in Charles S. Peirce, *Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance)*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover, 1958), 133.
48. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 134.
49. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," 133.

50. William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, reprint edition (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), 218.

51. James, *Pragmatism*, 200, 201.

52. See, for example the discussion in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 1.65, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), 32. See also, Solomon, *Continental Philosophy since 1750*, 150.

53. See, Lawson, "Stories about Stories," xxiii-xxiv.

54. For my own lengthier treatment of Pannenberg's theological method, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Reason for Hope: The Systematic Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg* (New York: Oxford, 1990), 11-43.

55. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, three volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:21-22.

56. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:28-38.

57. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:38-48.

58. In his early essay, "What Is Truth?" Pannenberg shows that the Hebrew and Greek conceptions of truth have certain common features, including that of constancy. At the same time the Hebrew conception includes and goes beyond the Greek. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, transl. George H. Kehm, two volumes (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 2: 2-11.

59. See the essays "On Historical and Theological Hermeneutic" and "What is a Dogmatic Statement?" in Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, 1: 137-210.

60. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:53. See also, "What Is Truth?," in Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, 2: 1-27.

61. For a statement of this foundational definition of God, which Pannenberg articulates repeatedly, see Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Nature of a Theological Statement," *Zygon* 7/1 (March 1972): 11.

62. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:59-60.

63. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:54.

64. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 56-58.

65. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 16.

66. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 18.

67. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 74.

68. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 69.

69. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 80.

70. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 64.

71. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 118.

72. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 113.

73. Wood, *Epistemology*, 170.

74. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality*, 155.

75. Westphal, "Reader's Guide," 12.

76. for this designation, see, for example, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, 7. See also, Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 73-74.

77. Westphal, "Reader's Guide," 11; Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 73-78.

78. See, for example, Owen C. Thomas, "Theology and Experience," *Harvard Theological Review* 78/1-2 (1985): 192.

79. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:10.

80. Grudem, Systematic Theology, 32.

81. This was a central point of contention in the encounter between Carl F.H. Henry and Hans Frei at Yale. See, Carl F.H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," Trinity Journal 9 (Spring 1987): 19. For a similar critique, see Alister E. McGrath, "An Evangelical Evaluation of Postliberalism," in *Nature of Confession*, 35-39.

For a sympathetic treatment of this issue, see Bruce D. Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck, ed. Bruce D. Marshall (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 69-102.

Clark Pinnock notes this objection but then (erroneously) concludes that Lindbeck is not denying that doctrines make first order truth claims. Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 59.

82. See, for example, David H. Kelsey, "Church Discourse and Public Realm," in Theology and Dialogue, 7-34.

83. For a reading of Lindbeck that suggests that his program is not inherently antirealist, see Jeffrey Hensley, "Are Postliberals Necessarily Antirealists? Reexamining the Metaphysics of Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology," in *Nature of Confession*, 69-80.

84. David Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, System and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 7-8.

85. Holdcroft, *Saussure*, 10.

86. See, for example, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 99-104.

87. Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 13.

88. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 68.

89. Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*, 189.