Postliberal Theology:
A Very Brief Presentation

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One of the most memorable experiences of my doctoral studies was the annual gathering of Langham Scholars (UK) for three days of study, prayer, and encouragement. Doctoral students from all over the so-called developing world (which included my own Romania) were not only supported financially: we were also authentically cared for by our mentors. On one occasion, each scholar had to explain to the rest the thesis he or she was working on. Not a difficult task, I thought—until we were given the second part of the assignment: to explain the thesis's practical and spiritual significance in our lives.

People who have come across doctoral theses at some point in their lives know that these are some of the most obscure, narrow, technical, and almost utterly unintelligible works. Sometimes it is even embarrassing to be asked, "And what is your doctorate on?"

Most of my fellow scholars had either very practical, or at least historical, topics, or they had straightforward exegetical theses. A small number of us were focusing on systematic theology, with only a couple on philosophical theology. My own work was on "postliberal theology," and it was rather philosophical. As the students were explaining how learning from the experience of the church under communism has benefited their own spiritual life, or how they learned from the leadership mistakes of some regional body of believers in Ghana, or how a fresh exegesis of 1 Corinthians solves interesting practical quandaries, and so on, I was mind racing around these ideas: postliberal, spiritual, how do they go together?

When my turn came, I still had nothing. So I blurted out something like this: "I don't see any immediate spiritual value to my work. It's like the army (think compulsory military service): you just do what you

gotta do. I need my doctorate to return to teach in Romania."

As disappointing as my answer might have been to myself, as well as to others at that time, it was true. But I think it highlights an important thing about higher (especially doctoral) education. What starts out as a fad in the academia eventually influences the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the man in the street. The precise way in which highly abstract ideas will become relevant isn't always transparent at the moment of their inception, when they are nothing but the latest theory. Hence my inability to predict exactly in what ways postliberal theology cashes out in spiritual life. This is not true with all intellectual trends, but it is certainly true with this theological movement, also called narrative theology (if this rings more bells).

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My challenge is to give a brief introduction to postliberal theology to a thoughtful, yet not necessarily philosophically trained, readership. As an academic, I shudder at the task of giving an introduction to a terribly complex school of philosophical theology. Not only is my space limited, but to fully understand postliberal theology one should first study a little bit of epistemology and philosophy of language, besides having a cursory idea of the history of modern theology. The reader should therefore take this as an oversimplified and sketchy account that leaves out some important issues in the philosophy of language. It is best used as a guide or a map to a territory that one would have to explore on one's own.

A Working Definition

As the name suggests, postliberalism is a reaction against liberalism. It is not a reaction in the name of a theological conservatism, or an "evangelical" theology. It is a "mainline" reaction against a mainline liberalism. While there are points of affinity with evangelical theology, the relationship is at best one of fruitful tension, and at worst outright antagonism.

Reactions against liberalism were being heard as early as Karl Barth's commentary on Romans in the 1920s. The movement known as neo-orthodoxy had found a hospitable home on British and American soil, where it waged intellectual war with theologically liberal divinity schools and seminaries. But postliberalism intensified the opposition to liberalism by making it more intellectually respectable. Barth had reacted against liberalism in the name of a christocentric theology that seemed to many to be reactionary and insularist in its attitudes to philosophy and the sciences, which were still being regarded as the guardians of intelligibility and knowledge (scientism).

Meanwhile, however, a certain modern picture of rationality was beginning to crumble. It was precisely the picture that made Barth look reactionary, a prophet crying in the wilderness. Thinkers from Wittgenstein to Clifford Geertz to Thomas Kuhn were beginning to challenge modern theories of knowledge, which placed religion and tradition at a disadvantage vis-à-vis philosophy and particularly science. These postliberal thinkers upgraded neo-orthodoxy with this added legitimacy, transforming it in the process.[1] We might start, then, by defining postliberalism as *a theological school, or method, which applies a set of philosophical and sociological insights derived in particular from Wittgenstein and Geertz*. As we progress, we shall notice that the philosophical influence is counterbalanced by a more theological emphasis, leading us to qualify our working definition.

The Philosophical Horizon

I will just briefly recount this transition from a modern, foundationalist outlook to a generically postmodern, postfoundationalist account of rationality. The project of modernity was that of finding a rationality untainted by tradition, by religion, by customary patterns of thought. It was a dream of securing the objectivity of knowledge, of ethics, of religion. It was thought possible to purify language of all unnecessary rhetorical ornament, to arrive at that purely scientific language, which mirrors reality exactly. In fact, this was one of the core aspects of modern epistemology: truth and knowledge amounts to correspondence between our language (words, sentences, theories) and reality (things, actions, values). It was thought that the task of the individual, precisely as individual (one had to be suspicious of tradition and community, to dare think for oneself), was to gaze at the world and then adjust her language and beliefs in accordance with it. It was the task of the scientist to discover the true structure of reality, what things there are in the world; the task of the ethicist was to create a system of criteria that justified a universal morality; finally, the task of the theologian was that of discovering that which is universal in religion, that which is shared by all religious adherents in the world.

Let me say a little more about the religious aspect of the modern project. Modern liberal theology, following Schleiermacher, tended to regard all religions as being different symbolizations of a common and universal religious experience. The Muslim, Christian, and Hindu are all in touch with the same basic experience, but they choose to symbolize it differently. This approach is on a par with the Enlightenment disregard for the specificity, or positivity, of tradition. Religious people are naïve to think that their theological beliefs refer literally to their respective religious objects. Modernity thus operated a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to religious adherents' self-understanding. To remain actual, religion had to be rationalized, demythologized.

Two important things have to be noted here. First, the dualism between language and the world (or the experience of the divine) is still very clear: we are in a position to look at the experience, quite apart from the concepts that tradition symbolized it with, and then compare our symbols to the experience. The demythologizer is quite capable of sifting out the universal component in traditional religious affirmations. The school-of-religions scholar is also able to "discover" that fundamental and common religious experience.

Postliberal theology reacts against this modern project in religion. But it doesn't simply react against its liberalism. It also reacts against its conservative alternative. In fact, postliberalism argues that both conservative evangelical theology as well as its liberal nemesis share a common but fundamentally mistaken philosophy of language. Whereas the evangelical theologian believes that theological statements are literal representations of theistic objects, the liberal believes that these are symbolic expressions of religious experiences. In both cases a language-world or language-experience dualism is present, such that in

the first case doctrines can be compared to religious objects, and in the second symbols can be compared to elemental experiences.

However, the intellectual developments to which we have alluded have made this picture of our relationship to the world or to experience untenable. It is impossible in this context to give a full picture of this development, but it can be simplified in this way: *all our access to the world, including our experiences of the world is linguistic, and language is a public, not a private, thing.* We cannot compare our doctrines directly to our theistic objects, because we do not have an access to our theistic object that is independent of the language, concepts, and beliefs we already have about it. Similarly, there is no such thing as an experience that isn't already conceptualized in some form. Thus it is futile to use the "experience" to justify the symbols we use to express it. Each experience is already conceptual, which means that it is already public in a very real sense.

The attentive reader already sees how this realization cripples the modern project: no universal rationality can be discovered, because rationality is always dependent on some language and some tradition. This holds for science, as well as it does for ethics and religion. That is why postmodernity is regarded as making fresh space for religion, having chastened the claims for the supremacy of science. But postmodernity also spells the end of the project of finding the universal component in all religions. Liberalism has failed in its attempt to secure a stable foundation for theological justification. But conservatism has also missed the point that all our doctrines are themselves relative to the concepts we have at our disposal and cannot represent timeless representations of an independent reality.

The Narrative Quality of Scripture

George Lindbeck[2] calls the conservative evangelical position *cognitive-propositional* and the liberal position *experiential-expressivist.* Hans Frei,[3] representing what I and several other scholars see as the more theological strand of postliberal theology, reflects on the respective hermeneutics of evangelicals and postliberals. The conservatives, he notes, see biblical interpretation as a matter of discovering the things (e.g., people, events, histories) or the concepts (e.g., the attributes of God, righteousness) to which the texts refer. The meaning of the texts, in other words, is a function of its reference. Attention is fully focused on the "world behind the text," to use a well-known phrase, either in reconsti-

tuting events that have happened (the historical Jesus) or recovering authorial intention (what did Paul mean here?). Liberals, on the other hand, care little about the events behind the text (these are not historically accurate) or authorial intention (Paul's beliefs are antiquated), focusing on the experiences the texts give rise to, or the "world in front of the text." Thus the point of the Scriptures is not to speak about a real historical person who was dead and subsequently raised by God, but about the experience of spiritual rejuvenation that all readers of the text can have as they read it.

In the process, Frei laments, both liberals and conservatives have lost sight of the texts as texts, as narrative structures. The narrative character of the Bible was lost, argues Frei. We have begun treating the Scriptures as what they are not: either treatises of history or theological textbooks. Frei counsels recovering the category of narrative (not history, yet history-like) for our sacred book. What do narratives do? They render a character. But the character is never available independently of the story itself; it is but a function of the story. For Frei, the historiographical concentration on the Jesus of history lost from sight the particular manner in which his identity is mediated to us through those texts.

Notice that this is consonant with the philosophical development: we do not have access to a Jesus, independently of our language, which we can then use as a foundation for our theologies. The only Jesus we have is already linguistically mediated by the realistic narratives we have in Scriptures.

Narrative, Ethics, and Character

Furthermore, the authority of the Scriptures consists in that they shape the Christian community. Their primary function is not to set before us a set of timeless propositions (they are themselves historical), but to shape the community, as it gathers around them and allows them to shape its character.

Ethical knowledge is itself community- and tradition-bound. It is never independent of the Christian practices. Stanley Hauerwas develops this new epistemology in the field of Christian ethics. He critiques the modern and foundationalist project of finding universal criteria for right action and insists that Christian ethics should focus instead on development of character, which takes place precisely through reading the Scriptures. Such an ethic does not yield indubitably and universally right judgments but "happy" courses of action in specific circumstances.

The Rule Theory of Doctrine

Just like ethical knowledge, theological knowledge has to escape its representationalist ambitions. Given that we are finite, linguistic beings, our access to God and talk about God is always linguistic, making use of the best categories we might have at our disposal. Thus postliberals have advanced the so-called and much debated "cultural linguistic theory of doctrine" (or rule theory of doctrine). According to its main proponent, George Lindbeck, doctrine is not a representation of objective facts, but *an expression of the rules of the Christian practice.*

This is a notoriously difficult proposal, but in essence it is a claim that, because we never have a non-mediated access to God, *theology* gives the rules of the practice. What is this practice? It is the whole horizon in which a Christian moves, including his actions, the Scriptures, the practices of his community, the movement of the Spirit in that community, the experience of the resurrected Christ, in short a Christian's whole theistic experience—which is linguistic. This whole horizon cannot be abstracted; it is presupposed in every theological judgment; it is reflected in every doctrine. Theology is an attempt to make sense of the coherence of this whole horizon.

Let me try to illustrate this by appealing to a well-known doctrine of Christology: the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. According to propositionalists, this statement is true if and only if there exists something like a divine *ousia* (substance, essence), which the Son shares with the Father. But, many theologians argue, the concept of *ousia* is only a tool for helping us to talk about what different things have in common (e.g., the substance of "humanity" as a designator for what all human beings have in common). Its success does not depend on there actually existing something like this (there does not have to be a thing "humanity" out there outside of our language). Moreover, throughout the history of theology, other and allegedly better christological concepts have been suggested. Thus we talk about the social Trinity; we have different models of talking about the divine presence in Christ. If the propositionalists are right, argues Lindbeck, we can never find agreement between those who want to talk in terms of "substance" and those who don't, without one side capitulating. Yet the history of ecumenical discussion of the Trinity shows that agreement is reached without a single side admitting defeat.

In short, Lindbeck wants to argue that what is given is the whole Christian practice (one might say experience, provided the linguistic and practical aspect is un-

derscored). Christian theology attempts to make best sense of the practice, by drawing on the best concepts it has at its disposal. Patristic theologians preferred talking about substance; modern and contemporary theologians prefer other types of categories. This does not mean that everything goes, only that the satisfaction received from a given concept depends on how it manages to preserve certain intuitions or express certain rules. However, these intuitions can be preserved in a number of different ways. So, according to Lindbeck, different christological formulations are appropriate as long as they maintain the following rules of the Christian practice: First, there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus (the monotheism principle); second, the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being, who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place (the historical specificity principle); finally, "every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules."[4] *Homoousios* works not because there is a thing out there outside of language that corresponds to it, but because it has managed to preserve a number of rules essential to the practices that involve Jesus.

Ad Hoc Apologetics

One final tendency of postliberal thought is that it rejects systematic apologetics. It does so for the same reason it critiques the modern project of finding that which is common in all religious life. Since our knowledge depends not simply on the nature of the world, but also on the particular concepts with which our language and traditions endow us, it is futile to seek a common ground between the Christian and the atheist, for example, on the basis of which one might demonstrate the existence of God. If there is any apologetic method that might cohere with this approach, it would be the so-called presuppositionalist type. Postliberals think it is futile to try to step outside of language, so as to anchor it in reality. One learns what kinds of things there are in the world by learning to speak a particular language. The child learns to believe in God, simply by learning the language of faith from his parents and community. There is no language-independent or tradition-independent demonstration of that existence.

What Is at Stake?

We are now in a better position to expand our initial working definition along the following lines: *postliberalism represents a reconfiguration of the task of theology as being a reflection on Christian practices, rather than an*

objective description of the theistic object (God), correlated with a renewed emphasis on the narrative quality of Scripture and how this functions to shape a community.

While postliberal theology was "all the rage" in the closing two decades of the past century (that's more recent than it sounds), it seems to have lost momentum afterward, but not before influencing a number of influential evangelical theologians.[5] Moreover, after some significant but not fatal modification, a revitalized postliberalism is making a kind of comeback in what is sometimes (even more loosely) called emergent theology or, perhaps better, missional theology. Clearly, this is not simply an esoteric interest of some academic theologians, but it is playing straight into a number of sensibilities that our own evangelical audience begins to share. An assessment is therefore imperative. In the space I have at my disposal I can only begin to point out some areas where evangelical pastors and theologians ought to exercise discernment in relation to this attractive proposal.[6]

From authorially intended text to community? One of the areas of grave concern from the standpoint of an evangelical theology is a hermeneutical shift away from authorial intention to a community-centered interpretation. This slide is of a piece with the linguistic turn, which is suspicious of mental contents such as "intentions" and prefers "public" meanings (meaning as use). One can reasonably ask, though: is there not a normative use? If there is, does it not have a proper connection to the way in which the texts *were intended to be used?*[7] In other words, the shift toward community begs the question as to which use is proper.[8]

Whose community? Postliberal theologians themselves were beginning to have second thoughts about their optimism with regard to the notion of *a* Christian practice, of *the* Christian tradition.[9] If we define the unity of the Christian framework in practical as opposed to propositional terms, we deprive ourselves of the means of identifying normative Christianity. It is true, the gospel is always already contextualized in some form. But if we are to talk at all about *Christian* contextualizations, then we need some normative account of what it means to be Christian. Postliberalism has so far been unable to defend convincingly against the charge of fideism—reliance on faith rather than reason.[10]

Doctrines and reference. While postliberals may be reading all the right philosophers, I think they are drawing all the wrong conclusions from them. I am myself exaggerating here, but the point is that postliberals have taken the linguistic analogy too far and have pressed it in the service of a fideism which bor-

ders on solipsism. Admittedly, there has been some backpedaling and clarification on the part of postliberals with regard to the realism question. While more work needs to be done on the issue, both on the part of conservative propositionalists and postliberals, there are a number of false options that should immediately be ruled out. While doctrines are indeed self-involving (a technical term used in the conversation to denote that knowledge always involves language and social practices), it does not follow that they are *about* the practices. To admit, as I think we must, that our knowledge always involves concepts that have a history and are not necessarily universally shared does not mean that we do not in fact know and refer to extralinguistic reality. I cannot say more in this space, but I would like to echo the balanced opinion of a philosopher who sits on both sides of the fence: if there is no knowledge by acquaintance, it does not mean that there are no individual things to be known. There is, I believe, a realism which is integral in not only Christian theology that affirms that God is not simply a human construction, but also in the basic human practice of understanding. In not taking seriously the intentions of religious adherents to refer to extralinguistic reality (e.g., when using *homoousios*), postliberals fail in fact to explain ecumenical practice.

Authority as formativeness? Again, postliberals are right that it is not the sole function of language to represent reality. We do so many more things with words! But the reason why we can employ words in such a variety of tasks is ultimately dependent on truth-functional tasks. So, for example, the nonrepresentational statement "I thee wed" is not intended as a representation of reality. It is in fact the creation of a reality. But it can be a successful use of language only if certain things happen to be true. For example, the person standing behind the "I" must be a licensed marriage officiant. In other words, the performative function of language depends on its representative function.[11] That being said, postliberals are quite right to enlarge our understanding of what it means for propositions to function as part of a language. Yet we must not dichotomize between character-shaping stories and truth-stating propositions.

The importance of history. At this point as well, postliberals have sensed a real problem with our approach to the Scriptures. They are quite right to point out that we have sometimes imposed specifically modern canons of historiography upon the Scriptures. Their mistake is to replace those modern canons with either a structuralist (early Frei) or a community-oriented poststructuralism (later Frei),[12] which dogmatizes about

the character of these texts (as character-shaping stories) apart from an inquiry into both authorial intention and the truth of these texts.

There are numerous other points where an evangelical might disagree with the postliberal school. Yet I believe it is paramount that in doing so, one does full justice to both their intentions, as well as to their many incisive diagnoses, even as one may take issue with their corrective suggestions. Fundamentally, in evaluating these claims, evangelical pastors and theologians should neither obtusely swear allegiance to a modernist epistemology nor switch to a different, postmodern master. Both modernity and postmodernity are contributing valuable insights and attitudes to our performance of the gospel today. Neither should be taken to do more than that.

Notes

1. That there is a debate over whether Barth can be vindicated as a postliberal theologian illustrates the complexity of the postliberal genealogy.

2. George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London, UK: SPCK, 1984) is among the primary postliberal texts.

3. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974); see also the excellent collection of essays by Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, p. 44.

5. I would mention Nancy Murphy, Stanley Grenz, John Franke, and William J. Abraham. All of these in various degrees have been shaped by these theological conversations. They would not necessarily consider themselves postliberal (with the possible exception of Murphy), but they are all postfoundationalists.

6. I have provided a fuller critique in my *Postliberal Theological Method* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2005; Eugene: Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

7. Telford Work makes this point in his wonderful *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

8. Kevin Vanhoozer's *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005) is an evangelical attempt to come to grips with a proper postfoundationalism, yet preserving the canonical authority of Scripture.

9. In her 1997 book, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology,* postliberal theologian Kathryn Tanner has been making such claims.

10. One notable exception to this is Bruce D. Marshall. See his *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

11. Some postliberals themselves recognize this point, in particular the early James Wm. McClendon, Jr., in a book coauthored with J. M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1975).

12. It is widely recognized that Frei's writing betrays a shift from an earlier formalism (meaning resides in the texts themselves) to a later community-oriented hermeneutics where the emphasis is laid on how the text functions in the community.

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