

LEARNING TO LISTEN: THOMAS C. ODEN ON POSTCRITICAL ORTHODOXY

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O how I long to travel back,
and tread again that ancient track! . . .
Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move.

Henry Vaughan, "Retreat"¹

In his 1979 *Agenda for Theology* Thomas Oden diagnosed modernity's terminal illness and prescribed a reformation in the direction of antiquity, a postmodern return to ancient orthodoxy that would leapfrog the recent past of modernity in favor of a normative patristic era. The depth of Oden's conviction is evident in that ten years later his prognosis and prescription remain unchanged. This past year he published a revision of *Agenda* entitled *After Modernity . . . What?*, adding four new chapters but preserving his original thesis.² The breadth of his vision is exemplified in three recent works where it is applied to systematic theology (*Word of Life*), ministerial care (*Pastoral Counsel*) and Biblical exegesis (*First and Second Timothy and Titus*). The success or failure of Oden's project hinges upon a two-pronged thesis, clearly expounded in all four volumes, that (1) modernity is dead and that (2) we need to learn anew how to listen to the consensual orthodoxy of the early Church, especially as that is found in what he calls the three venerable creeds, the seven ecumenical councils, and the eight great doctors of the Church of the east (Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Chrysostom) and west (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory).³

Word of Life, a mammoth tome devoted to Christology, is the second volume of Oden's three-volume systematic theology. In his initial volume on God, creation and providence (*The Living God*) Oden labored to be "self-consciously unoriginal in desiring not to add anything to an already sufficient apostolic faith," a posture he admitted many would find "mildly

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¹ Cited by T. Oden in *The Word of Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989) xxi.

² T. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

³ Cf. *After 175-184*, where Oden defines the core tradition in terms of a "vital center" with a "wide circumference." Cf. C. Pinnoch, *Tracking the Maze* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), which is dedicated to those who "want to move beyond modernism and fundamentalism to a form of postmodern orthodoxy." The works of D. Bloesch likewise aim for what Bloesch calls a "catholic evangelical" theology that draws upon the patristic and Reformation sources as an extra-Biblical canon of sorts.

amusing" in that his only claim was that the book contained nothing whatever that was new.⁴ A third volume (*Life in the Spirit*), due to be published this year, will address the Holy Spirit, the Church, the sacraments, and the Christian life. According to Oden modernity, having been "fully corrupted by its own premises," is dead and gone. "We are now in a postmodern, postcritical situation, wherein the assumptions of modernity are no longer credible apart from tiny, introverted elites."⁵ For Christology this means the rejection of typical historical-critical attempts to reconstruct the "real" Jesus, replete as they are with their total lack of self-criticism, unquestioned philosophical predispositions, and exaggerated competence. Still, Jesus Christ lived in history, and Oden is not about to barter away historicism only to embrace fideism. While not disavowing historical inquiry, Oden reminds readers that it "cannot yield saving faith" nor "save one from sin," and in a sense "the reform of Christology cannot proceed without offense to historicism."⁶

But how did Oden arrive at this reversal of the hermeneutic of suspicion wherein the tables are turned and criticism is now criticized? In his "Personal Interlude: A Path Toward Postcritical Consciousness"⁷ he autobiographically outlines his theological pilgrimage that began with a heart that was genuinely "Bultmannian" (cf. *Radical Obedience: The Ethics of Rudolph Bultmann*, a revision of his Yale dissertation) and passed through Barth even to "stubborn criticisms" of neo-orthodoxy, only to arrive today at what he calls "consensual orthodoxy." Thus *Word of Life* begins with a basic methodological assumption, the "implausible pretensions of the critical study of Jesus."⁸ Modernity is dead, according to Oden, and he has written its autopsy.

Oden's fundamental redirection came in the late 1960s when while reading Nemesius (bishop of Emesia in Syria, author of *On the Nature of Man*, fl. c. A.D. 400) "something clicked. I learned that I must listen intently, without reservation. Listen in such a way that my whole life depended upon hearing. Listen in such a way that I could see telescopically beyond my modern myopia. . . . Only then in my forties did I begin to become a theologian."⁹ The resulting theological method, as Oden observes tongue-in-cheek, is "Vincentian and not Bultmannian." In his *Commonitorium* of 434 Vincent of Lérins urged believers to accept as required orthodoxy that which has been believed "everywhere, always, and by all," a canon Oden takes literally and with utmost passion. *Word of Life* thus rehearses consensual, orthodox Christology that has been unanimously received by

⁴ T. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper) xi, xiii (italics his).

⁵ Oden, *Word* 527. For Oden's full definition of modernity see *After* 43-58.

⁶ Oden, *Word* 529-530.

⁷ *Ibid.* 217-220. For another, more recent autobiographical account of Oden's pilgrimage from liberalism to orthodoxy see his interview with C. Hall, "Back to the Fathers," *Christianity Today* (September 24, 1990) 28-31. Cf. also the entire part 2 of *After*, "Critique of Criticism," pp. 103-150.

⁸ Oden, *Word* 220-228. Cf. *After*, chap. 7, "The Broken Promise of Critical Method," and chap. 8, "The Limits of Historical Method."

⁹ Oden, *Word* 219-220.

east and west, by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox believers. "I view my task as an extraordinary privilege—that of unapologetically setting forth in an undisguised way the apostolic testimony to Christ in its classic consensual form."¹⁰

Oden admits that, given his twofold thesis regarding the death of modernity and the normative canon of consensual orthodoxy, many will find it amusing (although he considers it "a sober, ironic fact") that *Word of Life* is "an introduction to its annotations."¹¹ As promised, the text is entirely predictable and narrates an avalanche of long quotations from the Biblical and patristic sources. Parts 1-2 set forth consensual orthodoxy on the person of Christ, establishing that he was true God, true man, and one Person with two natures. Parts 3-4 focus on the work of Christ, arranged around the classic themes of prophet, priest and king.

In the introduction to his *First and Second Timothy and Titus*¹² Oden gives notice that his commentary is "unusual in two ways." First, instead of treating the text in a verse-by-verse manner he has organized the three epistles topically according to five major themes: authority of the apostolic tradition, the heart of Christian preaching, pastoral care, right ordering of ministry, and some conclusions. No footnotes clutter the text, the handful of Greek words mentioned is always transliterated, and Oden makes the commentary especially practical by constant interludes that discuss "preaching questions" ranging from issues of race and gender to anti-Semitism, worship, liturgy, intergenerational transmission of faith, and the like.

Second, and more important still, is his intention "to provide a commentary on the Pastorals grounded in the classical, consensual tradition. . . . The underlying conviction is that the better interpreters of the Pastorals are classical Christian exegetes."¹³ Indeed "most of what is enduringly valuable in contemporary biblical exegesis was discovered by the fifth century."¹⁴ Why are they better? Not just because they are earlier but because the classic exegetes were "more attentive" to the text, which is to say that they came to the text to listen and not to question. Instead of coming to the texts as subjects who lord it over an objective datum they saw themselves as objects and the text as the subject. The text, not the reader, asks the questions. Thus today we must "treat the text as the veritable address of God" and "*listen* for the plain sense of Scripture."¹⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that Oden affirms Pauline authorship for all three epistles (except for Marcion, this was never questioned for eighteen centuries): "The case against Pauline authorship reeks with difficulties."¹⁶

Having committed himself to a consensual, orthodox exegetical tradition, Oden affirms that it comes as no surprise that the offense of the gospel

¹⁰ Ibid. xi.

¹¹ Ibid. xiv.

¹² T. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989).

¹³ Ibid. 2-3.

¹⁴ Oden, *Word* xi.

¹⁵ Oden, *First* 16 (*italics his*). Cf. pp. 66, 92.

¹⁶ Ibid. 15.

scandalizes modernity. Commenting on 2 Tim 1:8 Oden writes with a candor equaled only by his passion:

Academic theology remains ashamed of this apostolic testimony. I teach in a seminary. I know how embarrassed we professors are about the gospel and how hard we work to try to make the gospel conveniently acceptable to the modern mind. We will do almost anything to get wider university applause. We are ashamed of the fact that God hates sin, that we are sinners, that human history remains a history of sin, that God has suffered vicariously for us in order to redeem us from our sin. We are even ashamed of our own dear Loises and Eunices—our grandmothers and mothers. We cannot believe that they could have had greater integrity and strength than we have.¹⁷

Or commenting on v. 10 of the same passage, Oden observes that a renewal of Christianity requires recovering the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. The problem here, though, is that "we have been cheated by modernity. Modernity has blinded our historical perspective. It has cut us off from the past. It has fixated our attention upon naturalistic explanations, upon reductionistic assumptions about the meaning of anything to which one can point."¹⁸ But this censorial modernity has "now has come to a senile end." We need not worry that orthodox Christianity can survive modernity, for the irony is that "modernity is not even surviving itself. Modernity has not survived these times. All we have left is postmodernity. Modernity has long been in the process of radical disintegration."¹⁹

Pastoral Counsel completes Oden's four-volume Classical Pastoral Care series and follows *Crisis Ministries* (volume 4, published first because it contained bibliographical and biographical materials, 1986), *Becoming a Minister* (volume 1, 1987) and *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament* (volume 2, 1989).²⁰ The purpose of the series is "to present in plain English the most indispensable texts of pastoral writers prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century," its primary theme "the care of souls, viewed historically."²¹ Organized around nine thematic chapters, *Pastoral Counsel* treats in turn conditions of a helping relationship, metaphors of pastoral counsel, the analogy of God's own care for people, timing in pastoral counsel, dynamics of language and silence, the work of admonition, discipline and comfort, nurturing responsible freedom, anticipations of modern psychotherapy, and the dynamics of human willing. The text is in fact an anthology. The book's format calls for Oden's short introductions to the readings in small print, with the primary source selections in large print. Most of the readings are less than a page.

As in the first two books, Oden affirms his twofold thesis, but this time with a new twist. "Earlier texts are preferred to later texts"²² and serve today as a canon to which we do well to listen. Most so-called modern

¹⁷ Ibid. 128. Cf. p. 73.

¹⁸ Ibid. 130-131.

¹⁹ Ibid. 133.

²⁰ All four volumes are published by Crossroad Publishing.

²¹ T. Oden, *Pastoral Counsel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 1.

²² Ibid. 2.

insights were well understood by the ancient writers and contained in their writings at least in embryonic form. Further, much of the ancient wisdom confounds the pretensions of modern psychology. Contrary to Rogers and others, the pastoral counselor does follow diagnosis with admonition and advice.²³ The centrality of Scripture relegates human wisdom to a humbler role.²⁴ Modern counsel tends to be individualistic, while the counsel of the fathers stressed the need for community.²⁵ Modern study, unlike the consensual tradition, tends to separate psychology, theology and ethics.²⁶ The ancients radically question the modern assumption of the goodness of people and the corollary of historical optimism.²⁷

But beyond these corrections of modernity *Pastoral Counsel* is far more inclined than the other two volumes to find congruence between past and present. Granted that "classical Christianity remains ironically 'ahead' of modernity in its balance of complementary values and virtues so prone to imbalance in modern discussions,"²⁸ the primary emphasis in *Pastoral Counsel* is not to overthrow contemporary psychological wisdom but to show how it is continuous with the past. Modern ideas of transference, Roger's "unconditional positive regard," Freud's idea of self-disclosure, Kant's postulate that the sense of moral obligation presupposes the freedom to obey or disobey, the importance of body language, the recognition of personality types and temperaments, behaviorist insights about principles of habit, and primitive dream theories are all helpful modern ideas antedated by the classics. Ambrose even writes of the idea of the psychologist's couch as a symbol and paradigm of therapy.²⁹ So great is the congruence between ancient and modern psychological insights that Oden devotes an entire chapter (chap. 8) to it and documents how in rudimentary ways the classics anticipated habit modification, reinforcement techniques, psychoanalysis, reparenting, transference, religion as projection, care of the emotionally ill, and the like.

Oden's proclamation of the death of modernity is born of pathos and not joy. Still less does he write polemically or with bitterness. Listening to the ancient, consensual heritage does not demand an "uncritical credulity or archaism or idolatry of tradition."³⁰ Oden's position on the role of women in the Church would be hard to document in the early Church and its writers, and he even hints that modern caregivers might need to demythologize ancient accounts of demonology like that found in *The Life of St. Anthony* by Athanasius. None can complain that modern critical studies are neglected in his work. As an insider Oden has paid and continues to pay his dues to the critical guild. We must guard against both

²³ Ibid. 72. Cf. p. 160.

²⁴ Ibid. 103-104.

²⁵ Ibid. 182.

²⁶ Ibid. 199.

²⁷ Ibid. 209.

²⁸ Ibid. 226.

²⁹ Ibid. 251.

³⁰ Oden, *First* 23.

excessive conservatism that would overvalue the past and excessive progressivism that would undervalue it.³¹ Nor does Oden romanticize about a patristic golden age in which heterodox opinion never questioned orthodoxy. Quite the opposite. In Christology, for example, Marcion, Celsus, Valentius, Praxeus, Lucian and others, not nineteenth-century historical criticism, raised almost all of the crucial questions.

Readers will need to go elsewhere for the necessary task of contextualizing theology. Oden is most helpful in exegeting texts and tradition, least helpful in exegeting society. The latter task is surely as necessary as the former so that we can incarnate the Biblical mandate of living between two worlds.³² Studies like those of Douglas John Hall³³ or William Dyrness³⁴ come to mind, as do the many social-scientific studies by Jacques Ellul, as efforts that will compensate for this major weakness in Oden. Further, Oden is so intent on letting the ancients speak for themselves that he is long on recitation and short on explanation. He admits that some will find this boring, but he nevertheless considers it "essential."³⁵ Nor does he have any illusions about the reception of his methodology. "Some may feel that this argument, if taken seriously, would set theology back a hundred years. I would hope not—I would prefer a thousand or more."³⁶

Henry Vaughan would have liked that.

³¹ Oden, *Living* 362.

³² See John 17:6-19 on the dialectical relationship of living in but not of the world, so that we live for the world.

³³ D. J. Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989).

³⁴ W. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

³⁵ Oden, *Word* 112.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 542.