

A TALE OF TWO ROADS: HOMILETICS AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

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Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler . . .

Robert Frost—"The Road Not Taken"

I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of authority has been the quintessential issue of the Enlightenment and especially of the twentieth century. This is true for the very simple reason that the Enlightenment, by its very name, celebrated the autonomy of reason and humanity. Until the Enlightenment, philosophers and theologians traveled a single road: Authority Avenue. In the eighteenth century, however, these travelers came to a fork in the road. The old road was marked with the old sign "Authority of Revelation." The new road sign, marking the new fork, read "Autonomy of Reason." Many travelers who passed that way were so busy practicing their art that they never noticed the fork. Others were confused by the lexical and grammatical similarity of the signs. No doubt many merely assumed that either road was an equally viable route to their ultimate destination.

The result was politically, socially, ethically, philosophically, and religiously momentous. The Enlightenment witnessed the rise of the democratic state, resulting in the mitigation of political authority, humanism, resulting in the mitigation of moral authority, and religious liberalism, resulting in the mitigation of religious authority.

Enlightenment modernity distrusted authority. Radical postmodernity dismantles authority. Edward Farley's oft-repeated statement sums up the late twentieth-century scenario: "the house of authority has collapsed."¹ For many, great was the fall of it.

Listen to Lyotard as he refers to the Bible as fable with its "despotic deposit of divine utterance."² Deconstructionist Mark Taylor said, "Everything

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¹ Edward Farley, "Scripture and Tradition," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks* (2d ed.; ed. Peter Hodgson and Robert King; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 76.

² Jean-François Lyotard, "Retortion in Theopolitics," in *Toward the Postmodern* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities, 1993) 122.

inscribed in the divine milieu is thoroughly transitional and radically relative."³ Homilete Scott Johnston tells us that "to be postmodern is to be post-certain."⁴ Furthermore, the rebuilt house will look radically different from the old one. Sallie McFague tells us how to reconceive Scripture after the collapse of the house of authority:

The reformation of Christianity coming out of Enlightenment and recent liberation theologies is an attempt to return to the roots of the faith. Those who insist that a canonical view of Scripture is not possible; that a dynamic rather than a static view of God is appropriate; that stress on the work rather than on the person of Christ is right; that hierarchical, patriarchal models of God's relationship to the world are oppressive and destructive; that other religions . . . offer a needed corrective to Christianity. All who emphasize these points do so because they believe that the essence of Christianity demands such emphasis.⁵

Notice that it is not postmodernity demanding such emphasis according to MacFague, but the "essence" of Christianity which demands it. In other words, the previous conception of Christianity by the apostles, Fathers, medieval and reformation Christians, orthodox scholastics, some Enlightenment liberals, and all evangelical Christians was flawed.

In light of this, it should come as no surprise that the question of Biblical authority has been the burning issue of the century. This issue has been at the heart of the rise of neo-orthodoxy and American evangelicalism. It is also the reason why these two have been at each other's throats for the past half-century.

Every sermon preached presupposes a certain theology and a concept of authority. David Buttrick highlighted the essence of the authority problem for homiletics when he remarked that "conventional notions of Biblical authority . . . are no longer tenable"⁶ and that "we shall have to rethink the nature of authority."⁷ There is certainly a need for more work to be done in the overall area of a theology of preaching as Ronald Allen in a paper at the Academy of Homiletics pointed out: "Preaching is preeminently a theological act, yet there is a near lacuna in our literature: we give little attention to theological analysis of the preaching event."⁸

Lately, the field of homiletics has begun to wrestle with the authority issue and, like Jacob, refuses to let go without some blessing of authorization. Recently, Charles Campbell has shaken the homiletical house with his book *Preaching Jesus*, where he seeks to demonstrate that the New Homiletic remains dependent upon the modern liberal paradigm. Campbell's solution

³ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 16.

⁴ Ronald Allen, Barbara Shires Blaisdell, and Scott Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 28.

⁵ Sallie McFague, in "An Epilogue: The Christian Paradigm," in *Christian Theology* 379.

⁶ David Buttrick, "On Doing Homiletics Today," in *Intersections: Post-Critical Studies in Preaching* (ed. Richard Eslinger; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 91.

⁷ Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 239.

⁸ Ronald Allen, "Agendae in Homiletics," in *Papers of the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics* (Fuller Theological Seminary, December 5-7, 1991) 35.

is to infuse homiletical theory with Hans Frei's postliberal theology which he considers to be much superior to the old and now defunct liberal paradigm.⁹ But more on this later.

II. ON THE ROAD WITH BARTH: THE SINISTER DICHOTOMY

Wilbur Marshall Urban began his 1939 volume *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* with the words, "Language is the last and deepest problem for the philosophic mind."¹⁰ Sixty years later, Urban's statement still stands and could be modified to include virtually every discipline, including theology and homiletics. But the story is best told by beginning one hundred years ago, for the theological and homiletical harvest which we have at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the result of seeds sown at the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the death of Nietzsche in 1900 and the publication of Harnack's *What is Christianity* in that same year, old grandpa liberalism limped into the twentieth century already ailing from what would turn out to be a terminal disease. He had lived his life in the far country of subjectivism and had all but squandered his precious reformation heritage through riotous historical-critical living. Among his progeny, however, was a young man named Barth who came to his senses and sought to return to the father's house. Oddly enough, it was Barth's experience in the pulpit that taught him the bankruptcy of liberalism. To paraphrase Robert Frost in "Mending Wall," "Something there is about preaching that does not love an unsure word from God."¹¹

Barthian neo-orthodoxy got sidetracked and never quite made it completely back home. Barth missed a sign along the road and somehow detoured from Authority Avenue onto Kantian Boulevard. It was an easy mistake to make, after all, his roadmap was Kant's epistemology and most of the other travelers were taking the same road. At first wide and well-paved, it soon began to narrow, potholes appeared, and eventually it led to a dead end. Barth's back seat Biblical Theology passengers were left scratching their heads, failing to realize that the problem was their continued trust in the Kantian roadmap. According to the roadmap, there were certain things which KANT be done, namely, the words of Scripture KANT be the objective revelation of God and hence KANT lead to the Father's house of Transcendence. It was the old story "you just KANT get there from here!"

Barth's major theological *faux pas*, entailing immense repercussions for theology, was his assertion that the Bible, as a witness to revelation, is not itself revelation.

⁹ Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Post-liberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) xii.

¹⁰ W. M. Urban, *Language and Reality* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939) 21.

¹¹ *The Road Not Taken* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950) 556.

In the Bible we meet with human words written in human speech, and in these words, and therefore by means of them, we hear of the lordship of the triune God. Therefore when we have to do with the Bible, we have to do primarily with this means, with these words, with the witness which as such is not itself revelation, but only . . . the witness to it.¹²

For Barth, this “witnessing” aspect of Scripture to God’s revelation is nothing more than human speech. The witness does not speak in the name of God, nor do the words of the witness (the Bible) give us God’s revelatory speech. Furthermore, the content of the witness is itself not free from error. Nor is the error for Barth restricted to matters of history or science, but can extend even to the theological and ethical views of the Biblical writers.¹³

The Scripture becomes the Word of God for Barth when it is taken and used by God to speak to us and when it is heard by us as the witness to divine revelation. Thus, for Barth, God’s speech by way of Scripture is, according to Wolterstorff, “presentational, rather than authorial, speech.”¹⁴ Revelation is originally and directly the word of God, while the Bible and preaching are derivatively and indirectly so according to Barth.¹⁵

Yet Barth can and does speak of the Bible as the Word of God. It is not the Word of God in an ontological sense as we have seen. In what sense, then, is it the Word of God? “The Bible is God’s Word to the extent that God causes it to be his Word, to the extent that He speaks through it. . . . The Bible, then, becomes God’s Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God’s Word the little word ‘is’ refers to its being in this becoming.”¹⁶ For Barth, like President Clinton, it all depends on what the meaning of the word “is” is! And clearly this is a functional “is” and not an ontological “is.”

Barth consistently avoids ever saying that human speech is appropriated for divine speech in the Scripture. Wolterstorff suggests two reasons why this is the case. First, Barth never rejected higher criticism and believed that its results made an inerrant text impossible. Second, Barth believed, as do most non-evangelical theologians today, that if God speaks by way of authoring Scripture, then his sovereign freedom is compromised.¹⁷ Virtually all theologians of a non-evangelical stripe have appropriated Barth’s two reasons as intransigent axioms of theology.

Many of the so-called “neo-evangelicals” have also appropriated Barth’s thinking on this point. Bernard Ramm’s *After Fundamentalism* argues that

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 463. For Barth’s view of Scripture as witness to revelation, see especially Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962) 15–86.

¹³ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 68. This work is an excellent critique of the Barthian, Ricoeurian, and Derridian programs. Wolterstorff’s critique of Barth’s dichotomy between the words of the Bible and the Word of God is quite incisive.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 71.

¹⁵ Barth, *CD* I/1 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 513; Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* 73–74.

Barth's methodology is the answer to the dilemma of being a theological child of the Enlightenment and yet maintains a historical Christian faith. In describing Barth's view of how Scripture can be described as God's Word, Ramm uses the words *diastasis* and *diffraction*. By the former, Ramm means that there is an "interval" between the Word of God and the Scriptures. This interval allows for historical and literary criticism of the text without surrendering the theological integrity of the text. By diffraction Ramm means that when the Word of God enters the language of the Bible, it is no longer perfectly reflected.¹⁸

In spite of all this, Barth and his cadre maintain that the Word of God is still to be found in the Scriptures. But this is precisely the point at issue! Who or what will tell us what is and what is not to be considered as God's word in the written Word? How is one to know when God has taken up the Bible and spoken through it?

The implications of the above discussion regarding the Barthian position on Scripture for preaching can be illustrated in an exchange that occurred between Barth and Carnell in 1962 at the University of Chicago Divinity School where Barth was lecturing. During the lectures, Carnell directed a question to Barth regarding his refusal to assert the ontological existence of the devil. Barth countered by saying that the attitudes of Jesus and the Gospel writers to the existence of Satan cannot be considered sufficient reason for affirming it. Later in the same session Barth gave a detailed analysis of the meaning of *ὑποτάσσω* (submit) in Rom 13:5 and indicated that the Christian is bound to be involved in society by this verse. The problem was succinctly summed up by John W. Montgomery when he concluded, "Why bother to milk any N.T. word for its full theological import if the unwavering position of the Gospels with regard to the ontology of the demonic can be discounted?"¹⁹

Evangelical Donald Bloesch has also affirmed a Barthian position: "A careful examination of early Protestant orthodoxy . . . reveals that the distinction between the word of God and the words of the Bible was quite common."²⁰ He says quite pointedly in his response article to Elmer Colyer, "I refuse to identify the Bible with divine revelation."²¹

¹⁸ Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 89–90.

¹⁹ John W. Montgomery, *The Suicide of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1970) 192.

²⁰ Donald Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983) 118. See also his *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*, Vol. 2 (Christian Foundation Series; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994). For a recent and thorough presentation and evaluation of Bloesch's views of the nature and authority of Scripture and his dependence upon and agreement with Barth on this issue, see Frank Hasel's *Scripture in the Theologies of W. Pannenberg and D. G. Bloesch: An Investigation and Assessment of its Origin, Nature and Use* (European University Studies 23/555; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996), especially pp. 217–262.

²¹ Bloesch, "A Response to Elmer Colyer," *Journal for Christian Theological Research* [http://apu.edu/~CTRF/articles/1996_articles/bloesh.html] 1:2 (1996). See also Gary Dorrien's *The Re-making of Evangelical-Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1998) 190–193, where he offers a good discussion of Bloesch on this issue, showing his dependence upon Barth.

Stanley Grenz affirmed the identical position in his *Theology for the Community of God*. He remarks that Ramm has offered a service in raising Barth's banner within evangelicalism and says, "We cannot simply equate the revelation of God with the Bible."²² Grenz outlines a threefold connection of revelation with the Bible. First, following Barth's language, the Bible is revelation in a "derivative" sense. Second, the Bible is "functional" revelation. Third, the Bible is "mediate" revelation in that it mediates to us the proper understanding of God's essence.²³ Thus, for Grenz, the Bible is derivatively, functionally, and mediately revelation, but it is not ontologically revelation.

Evangelicals are often accused by their non-evangelical counterparts—and sometimes by those within their own camp—of reducing the text of Scripture to pure propositions. For example, Henry Knight's *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* offers a one-sided critique of what he calls "propositionalism."²⁴ Knight writes as though Henry, Nash, and Packer had no conception of revelation beyond the kind of propositionalism which he denigrates. Note also Donald McKim's *The Bible in Theology and Preaching*, especially chapters six and seven.²⁵ Chapter Six is entitled "Neo-Orthodox Theology: Scripture as Witness" and discusses Barth's position on Scripture as "witness." Chapter Seven, entitled "Neo-Evangelical Theology: Scripture as Message" is interesting for two reasons: first, McKim does not discuss the wing of evangelicalism that identifies Scripture as the Word of God; and second, he reveals the fact that he himself is actually more at home with the Barthian neo-orthodox position in that the chapter uses the word "message" only eleven times but "witness" as many as thirteen times. McKim cannot get away from the neo-orthodox shibboleth "witness." I fail to see much difference in the "neo-orthodox" position of his Chapter Six and the (moderate to left-wing) "neo-evangelical" position of his Chapter Seven.

For Barth, Bloesch, Ramm, Grenz, McKim, and others, the "reduction" is a result of a false identification of the Word of God with the Word written—Scripture. In reality, it is they who labor under a false linguistic dichotomy, which is at the heart of the Barthian failure to identify Scripture with the Word, speech, and revelation of God. Much of this concern for identifying Scripture with the Word of God could be allayed if we adopt J. L. Austin and John Searle's "speech act" approach to language. Speech act theory has a built-in safeguard against reducing textual meaning to nothing more than propositional content. Language as speech acts has propositional content but also illocutionary and perlocutionary force. Scripture contains more than mere propositional revelation, but it certainly does not contain less.

²² Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 511, 514.

²³ *Ibid.* 516–517.

²⁴ Henry Knight, *A Future For Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 86–87.

²⁵ Donald McKim, *The Bible in Theology and Preaching: How Preachers Use Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

The work of Vanhoozer, particularly his *Is There a Meaning in this Text?*, applies successfully Austin and Searle's linguistic insights in speech act theory to textual interpretation.²⁶ The resultant theological and hermeneutical approach to texts avoids the Barthian dichotomy on the one hand and so-called "propositionalism" on the other. This approach bodes well for homiletical theory that wants to maintain Biblical authority but also recognize the multi-dimensionality of language.

Furthermore, text analysis models such as that of Beekman and Callow's *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication*, Robert Longacre's *The Grammar of Discourse*, and Mann and Thompson's *Discourse Description* that identify the propositional semantic (deep) structure of language reveal that there is a finite set of communication relations (Longacre prefers to call them "cognitive relations") that are not language-specific.²⁷ The surface structure can be rewritten as propositions²⁸ and the communication relations identified. This is true for symbolic, figurative, and metaphorical language as well. The proposition is the irreducible minimum of communication, but it certainly does not exhaust all that inheres in language, meaning, metaphor, use and the communication event. As McGrath points out, a propositional approach to revelation does not exclude other approaches. "To assert that revelation involves information about God is not to deny that it can also involve the mediation of the presence of God, or the transformation of human experience."²⁹

All who opt for the Barthian dichotomy regarding the Word of God and the words of Scripture become inextricably entangled with inconsistency. Indeed, as J. I. Packer put it, "all who link the assertion that God genuinely communicates through Scripture with the denial that the written text as such is God's utterance become incoherent sooner or later."³⁰ Frank Hasel well illustrates the inconsistency of Donald Bloesch's approach to the nature of Scripture on this point. In reference to Bloesch's comment that the text of Scripture, apart from its theological and spiritual context, is "fallible and deficient" and that its fallibility extends beyond matters of history to matters of theology,³¹ Hasel notes that "one wonders about the consistency of Bloesch's assertion that Scripture contains a fallible and deficient account, even in matters of ethics and theology, and his simultaneous affirmation that the Bible is nevertheless 'not mistaken in what it purports to teach.' If

²⁶ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text: The Bible, The Reader and the Reality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). See especially 208–213 and 243–252.

²⁷ John Beekman, John Callow, Michael Kopeseck, *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1981); Robert Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse* (Topics in Language and Linguistics; New York & London: Plenum, 1983); and W. C. Mann and S. A. Thompson, eds., *Discourse Description* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1992).

²⁸ "Proposition" is here used in a somewhat un-Clarkian (Gordon Clark) sense; a sense somewhat broader than is usually found in discussions of "propositional revelation," but nonetheless related.

²⁹ Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 155.

³⁰ J. I. Packer, "Infallible Scripture and the Role of Hermeneutics," in *Scripture and Truth* (ed. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 347.

³¹ Bloesch, *Holy Scripture* 126 and 78.

the potential for error is grounded in Scripture's humanity, as Bloesch seems to hold, how can it not be mistaken in what it purports to teach?"³²

If the Barthian position, which Bloesch, Grenz, and others advocate, is true, then there is an inescapable loss of Biblical authority, because we are left in an epistemological quandary. Barth may consider the Biblical idea of Satan to be false, while we consider it to be an accurate reflection of the Word of God in the written words of Scripture. Who arbitrates such disputes? In Barthian theology, there is no one to arbitrate; the epistemological foundations have been undercut. In addition, the hermeneutical foundations have been undercut, as Barth's system aids and abets textual indeterminacy with its concomitant pluralism of textual meaning as well as theological assertions.

This reluctance on the part of many within the fold of evangelicalism to equate Scripture with the Word of God in an ontological sense is at the heart of the issue of Biblical authority and was once the hallmark distinction between evangelical and non-evangelical theologians. Barth's dichotomy between the Word of God and the words of Scripture is indeed a sinister dichotomy for theology, and since it is not supported by Scripture itself must be rejected by evangelicals. It belongs in the right wing of postliberalism, not the left wing of evangelicalism.

In my view, the Barthian dichotomy is also at the heart of the distinction between evangelical and non-evangelical preaching. If the written words of Scripture are not to be considered as God's revelatory speech, then the preaching of the Bible in an expositional manner becomes less important—which is exactly what we see in the so-called "new homiletic." Wayne Grudem is right on target concerning the impact of the very "words" of Scripture in the sermon and the resultant authority for preaching:

Throughout the history of church the greatest preachers have been those who have recognized that they have no authority in themselves and have seen their task as being to explain the words of Scripture and apply them clearly to the lives of their hearers. Their preaching has drawn its power not from the proclamation of their own Christian experiences or the experiences of others, nor from their own opinions, creative ideas, or rhetorical skills, but from God's powerful words. Essentially they stood in the pulpit, pointed to the Biblical texts and said in effect to the congregation, "This is what this verse means. Do you see the meaning here as well? Then you must believe it and obey it with all your heart, for God himself is saying this to you today!" Only the written words of Scripture can give this kind of authority to preaching.³³

³² Hasel, *Scripture* 245–246, with reference to Bloesch, *Holy Scriptures* 115. Cf. also Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Expository Preaching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996) 87–109.

³³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 82. See also Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words* 15–26.

Thus, Barth remains the central figure around which much of twentieth-century theology revolved. His influence on Ramm, Bloesch, Grenz, and many others in the evangelical camp is evident.³⁴ His influence on Ricoeur in hermeneutics as well as Frei and Lindbeck in theology is unmistakable as well, as we shall see.

III. ON (OR OFF) THE ROAD WITH DERRIDA: THE DERRIDIAN CARNIVAL

Whatever happens in theology usually happens in homiletics about ten to twenty years later. The homiletician always arrives late to the theological battlefield, often to discover that the last Philistine has been slain! Thus it comes as no surprise to learn that word only recently has reached the homileticians that the Derridian carnival is now playing on the other side of town. Many theologians such as Mark Taylor have become permanent fixtures at Derrida's 3-ring circus which is touted to be the greatest show on earth. Interestingly, the carnival tent in Europe is virtually empty, as Derrida's greatest show on earth is being increasingly neglected and rejected. But just like homiletics, that which begins in Europe as a theological novelty usually takes ten to twenty years to make it across the ocean. That Frankenstein of literary criticism called deconstruction turns Western philosophical thinking on its head and has become quite the rage in North America.

Had more people bothered to consult those sometimes eccentric folk we call linguists, the embarrassment of wasting money on the price of a ticket could have been averted. I recognize that listening to or reading linguists practicing their art ranks right up there somewhere between an IRS audit and a root canal. Their presentations can be quite intimidating when they engage in matters of set theory and logical notation. Nevertheless, we ignore their insights about language at our own peril.

Early on, many linguists pointed out the root problem with deconstruction from a linguistic perspective, namely, that it errs in the area of language. Derrida makes no less than six errors regarding language: (1) Writing is anterior to speech and is of primary importance; (2) Saussure's doctrine of the arbitrary nature of the sign is unfounded; (3) logocentrism has placed an undue emphasis on speech while relegating writing to a position of secondary representation of speech; (4) the linguistic sign is opaque, and meaning is thereby inaccessible to complete understanding or interpretation; (5) it is therefore not possible to analyze a text except in relation to itself; and (6) the

³⁴ Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 77–82. Erickson's treatment of Bloesch in this section relies upon Bloesch's *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2, *Life, Ministry, and Hope* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), and not his *Holy Scripture* (1994). Bloesch's views expressed in *Holy Scripture* show he has "edged" toward Barth in sixteen years. Thus, Erickson offers a charitable reading of Bloesch: "It appears that we have here a view of revelation and the Bible that is basically the orthodox view, but influenced by elements of Barth's view" (81). If one accepts the Barthian dichotomy of Word of God and words of Scripture, as Bloesch clearly does, then such a view is no longer "basically orthodox" with respect to revelation and the Bible.

aim is thus to deconstruct literature until its internal inconsistencies are evidenced, thus showing the impossibility of stable meaning.³⁵ As a result, deconstruction should be relegated to the never-never land of pseudo-linguistics.

Deconstruction parades itself as the grand leveler. All texts are created equal. In today's climate of reader-response criticism à la Fish, deconstruction becomes a hermeneutical Will Rogers, never meeting a text or interpretation which it doesn't like.

But all is not well on Derrida's hermeneutical farm, for some of the animals are beginning to alter the rules painted on the barn wall. Specifically the last rule, the one that says "all texts are created equal," now bears the addendum, "but some texts are more equal than others." A Derridian text appears to be more equal than its evangelical counterpart.

Through constant word juggling, verbal legerdemain, and semantic wrenching, Derrida has managed to muddle the thinking of many theologians, including some in the evangelical tradition. It is particularly annoying to read a paper or hear a tape of someone in ETS who, seeking to instruct us in the more excellent way, warns us that we have all overreacted to Derrida and should see the validity in some of his proposals. To a number of us, to do so appears to be casting our pearls before swine, since one can find nothing among the few valid proposals of Derrida that has not been stated earlier. After all, it was Paul, not Derrida, who first said: "We see through a glass darkly," and it was Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, not Derrida, who first taught us that we are living in the interim between the "already" and the "not yet." Orthodox Christianity affirms that there is a genuine "not yet" in the future. Derrida has nothing to offer but endless deferral. As evangelicals, we must choose between a Chamberlain or Churchill approach to deconstruction. A Chamberlain compromise will ultimately result in our borders being overrun. It makes about as much sense to listen to a gangster lecture on honesty as to accept uncritically Derrida's notions on language and textual meaning.

Deconstruction is an adolescent, and like most adolescents, it is constantly fascinated with what is novel. Unlike philology, the love of words, hard-line deconstruction is "misology," "word-hating." Deconstructionists have taken Wittgenstein's language games and thrown out the rules and the referees. Language and texts are treated as play-things. The more grotesquely they can be twisted out of their natural meaning the better.

Deconstruction is just one symptom of a literary, philosophical, and theological disease that afflicts modernity and postmodernity. Peter Kreeft called this disease "the eclipse of the permanent things" and noted with his usual incisiveness that, from the viewpoint of Christianity, postmodernity

³⁵ Robert Hall, "Deconstructing Derrida on Language," in *Linguistics and Pseudo-Linguistics: Selected Essays 1965-1985*, Vol. 55, 116-122, in *Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science* (gen. ed. E. F. Konrad Koerner; Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987) 116. Hall lists seven errors of Derrida, but one of his seven is not actually a linguistic error, though it is an error: "Logocentrism has served as a vehicle for Western imperialism."

looks like a gallows on which the permanent things are lynched without a trial.³⁶ From my perspective, the only ultimate cure for this disease is the Logos of God.

Lest the reader query what the Derridian carnival might have to do with homiletics and the issue of Biblical authority, one need only turn to what is perhaps the most recent work by homileticians on these issues by Ronald Allen, Barbara Blaisdell and Scott Johnston, *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos*. Derrida is referenced by two of these three authors, both negatively and positively. Most critical for our purposes are pages 71–78 where Scott Johnston discusses Derridian deconstruction. Regarding Derrida's insistence that there is no "center" for philosophy, theology, etc., Johnston asks whether this "pulls the plug on truth."³⁷ If one follows the lead of Mark Taylor, the answer would be yes; there are no constants and no truths. Johnston says that Mark Taylor's application of Derridian deconstruction to theology results in the banishment of preachers "to a homiletical Babel in which God is dead and our words have become futile signs wandering in a labyrinth from which there is no exit."³⁸ Johnston cites an alternative trajectory we may accept from Derrida, namely the Derridian "trace" or "shadow," the partial presence, the "mystery" Johnston calls "an aspect of truth that preachers would do well to contemplate."³⁹

We are on slippery ground here. Johnston notes that Derrida poses "salient and therapeutic questions" concerning the nature of gospel truth, because in Christian history the truth of Jesus Christ has been the "sponsor of both fantastic and horrible things."⁴⁰ Derrida can shake us free "from a dangerous sense of security" by prompting us to consider the character of the gospel: "Is it religious truth that, like any other truth, sits at *the center* of a structure, giving rise to and supporting ecclesial activities in the world?" Or is it like the "mysterious presence of our God, a truth that frequents the outskirts of our structures?"⁴¹ Such an approach to truth, according to Johnston, is consistent with the parabolic teachings of Jesus. The "center" of the gospel is not "a stationary object beneath our theological crosshairs. Instead it is a moving, mysterious truth, . . . refusing to be pinned down. . . ." ⁴² The slippery ground is now sloping.

Jude seems to pin it down at least somewhat when he refers in v. 3 of his epistle to the faith "once for all delivered to the saints." And what of Paul's reference to that body of truths which he had "received" (1 Cor 15:3)? When Paul uses the phrase "the pillar and ground of truth" in 1 Tim 3:15, he is,

³⁶ Peter Kreeft, "Darkness at Noon: the Eclipse of the Permanent Things," in *Permanent Things* (ed. Andrew Tadie and Michael Macdonald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 196.

³⁷ Allan, Blaisdell, and Johnston, *Theology for Preaching* 75.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 74.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 74–75.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* 76.

after all, affirming the reality of truth and some form of foundationalism.⁴³ Whenever I hear someone like Johnston using the parabolic teaching of Jesus as grounds for suggesting that the “center” or “truth” of the gospel is somehow not “nailed down,” I wonder if due credence is being given to the epistolary corpus of the NT revelation where the narrative events of the Gospels and Acts are interpreted for the church. Furthermore, even in the Gospels when Jesus used parables, he often interpreted the parable’s meaning for the disciples. The “truth” communicated by this parable, rather than “frequenting the outskirts of our structures,” is actually quite “stationary” and clear. It is hermeneutically unsound to appeal to the parabolic teaching of Jesus as justification for a soft reading of Derrida that veils truth in “mystery” when we have the epistolary corpus in the canon which chronologically and theologically complements and completes the parables. If the parable as a genre or as a foundation for the church’s teaching was what God intended, why does it not show up in the apostolic preaching of Acts or in the canonical writings of Paul, Peter, John, James, Jude, and the author of Hebrews?

Back to the slippery, sloping ground. Johnston then notes that “the truth of our preaching is not dependent on our rational ability to uncover and dispense the gospel.”⁴⁴ I am rather uneasy at this point, for it appears to me that Johnston, by the use of the codeword “rational,” is making the subtle but usual point against propositional revelation in the Bible. He relieves my anxiety a bit when he notes that more is necessary for the truthfulness of preaching “than when it corresponds with the experiences of listeners”⁴⁵ (disagreeing with the claim of one of his co-authors that a preacher’s statements are true when they are verified by what really happens in the world). But in the final paragraph of this section, he ultimately remains in Derrida’s grasp when he asks, “Will truth remain simply an object, something that we can be certain about, some ‘thing’ that we can study at the center of our finite systems, or will truth be understood as an active subject—God on the move.”⁴⁶ The truth of Jesus Christ “undermines our notions of security and would, by mysterious means, transform our experience of all that is.”⁴⁷

Johnston uses a favorite word of deconstructionists: “mystery.” It and its cognates occur four times in his discussion. I am reminded of the cogent warning of Roger Lundin’s critique of the Derridian carnival that “Christians may find themselves especially beguiled by the blandishments of de-

⁴³ My favorite illustration of the illogic of deconstruction is the experience of Ravi Zacharias upon learning of the exterior and interior design of the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts building on the Ohio State University Campus. Lauded by *Newsweek* as America’s first deconstructionist building, the interior houses stairways that go nowhere and pillars that hang from the ceiling without purpose, among other things. The building was designed to reflect the senselessness, incoherence, and instability of life and meaning. Unmasking the double standard of all deconstructionists, Zacharias asked if the architect did the same for the foundation (Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God* [Dallas: Word, 1994] 21)!

⁴⁴ Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston, *Theology for Preaching* 76.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 77.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

construction if they confuse poststructural indeterminacy with the idea of mystery."⁴⁸ The Biblical concept of mystery is "predicated upon a belief that all truth is eschatological . . . In the New Testament, the *kerygma* of the gospel announces the *mysterion*, which is the eternal counsel of God. . . . The full disclosure of the mystery awaits the *parousia* of Christ. The *indeterminacy* promoted in poststructuralism is a very different thing from a biblical sense of *mystery*."⁴⁹ Somehow I think Johnston's idea of "mystery" is Derridian at its core, even if he does not accept a Mark Taylor-reading of Derrida.

This work by Allen, Blaisdell, and Johnston reveals the encroachment that postmodern deconstruction is making (or they hope will be making) in homiletics. There is a clear rejection of anything resembling evangelical theology (they usually refer to it as "fundamentalism"). Preaching must be more "humble," less assertive of hard and fast truths. Objective truth revealed in the words of Scripture is eclipsed, and the entire focus is on the subject—God on the move, bringing a truth at the outskirts of our structures. I wonder what the apostle Paul would say about all of this?

IV. BACK TO THE ROAD WITH RICOEUR: REALITY THROUGH METAPHOR AND NARRATIVE

Fortunately, not everyone in this postmodern age is taken with the Derridian approach. In philosophical hermeneutics, a more balanced pose is struck by Paul Ricoeur. It would be difficult to overestimate the profound influence the work of French phenomenologist Ricoeur has exerted upon hermeneutics, Biblical studies and theology. Ronald Allen suggests that Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory "is becoming as canonical to the present generation of Biblical scholars as was the demythologizing program of Rudolf Bultmann a generation ago."⁵⁰ His three-volume *magnum opus* *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988) sets forth his own thinking in this area. In the summary toward the end of his third volume, Ricoeur concludes that the way human beings conceive of their identity is primarily through narrative. Furthermore, it is narrative which provides the primary signs and symbols through which meaning is appropriated in human experience.⁵¹

Thus, with help from literary criticism and philosophy (not to mention other disciplines), theologians have coupled humanity's narrative consciousness with the narratives of the Bible and come away with what has proven to be the most influential approach to theology since the demise of the neo-orthodox consensus: narrative theology.

⁴⁸ Roger Lundin, *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 204.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Ronald Allen, *Contemporary Biblical Interpretation for Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1984) 131.

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3 (trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 249. Four years later Ricoeur focused narrative on the constitution of the self in *Oneself As Another* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Ricoeur considers narrative to be an extension of metaphor.

As William Larkin points out, Ricoeur suggests that a text has semantic autonomy and projects a referential world which is independent of the “real” world. The logical nexus between thought and knowledge is poetic language, functioning to redescribe and translate reality through metaphor. This symbolic discourse is the indirect presentation of the noumenal.⁵² Ricoeur believes he has found a way to bridge Lessing’s ditch and to link Kant’s noumenal and phenomenal worlds.⁵³ But such symbols do not yield objective knowledge, and Ricoeur cautions that the symbols grounded in Biblical narrative must remain paradoxically on the boundary of reason or they become idols. Biblical narratives must not move within reason’s boundary lest they claim to add to our objective knowledge of reality. Thus, for Ricoeur, propositional revelation is not only impossible, it is idolatry.⁵⁴ “To say that the God who reveals himself is a hidden God is to confess that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing.”⁵⁵ This is a significant statement for understanding Ricoeur’s view on revelation: he clearly rejects propositional revelation in Scripture.

Mark Wallace’s introduction to the most comprehensive anthology of Ricoeur’s writings on religion and theological studies, *Figuring the Sacred*, is must reading for all who wish to understand Ricoeur’s written pilgrimage in this area. The following paragraph sums up nicely what Ricoeur thinks about revelation and the Bible:

In theological parlance, Ricoeur maintains that a variety of nonreligious and religious fictions (including the Bible) are potentially revelatory—not in the sense that they are *deposits* of divinely inspired truths but because they faithfully *enact* a productive clash, and sometimes a fusion, between their world and the world of the reader. Ricoeur understands *revelation* in performative, not propositional, terms: it is an event of new meaning between text and interpreter, rather than a body of received doctrines under the control of a particular magisterium. He refers to the disclosive power of figurative (including sacred) texts as an “areligious sense of revelation” just insofar as any poetic text—by virtue of its powers of metaphorical reference—can become a world that I inhabit and within which I project my innermost possibilities. The world of the text can figure the identify of the sacred and reveal dimensions of the human condition as such for any reader who risks her own self-understanding in the process.⁵⁶

One of the most important statements that illustrates Ricoeur’s view of the power of the text to disclose new possibilities and a new world to the self

⁵² William Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 59–60. This is an excellent work which interacts with a number of issues relative to Biblical authority, truth, hermeneutics, language, etc.

⁵³ Paul Ricoeur, “Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Semeia* 4 (1975) 145.

⁵⁴ William Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics* 59–60.

⁵⁵ Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Lewis Mudge; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 95.

⁵⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (trans. David Pellauer; ed. Mark I. Wallace; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 8–9.

is found in his 1976 work on interpretation theory: "It is the text with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego."⁵⁷

Contra Ricoeur, Helmut Thielicke makes the shrewd observation that "God's word is not interpretative; it is creative. It brings forth being out of nothing. It thus transcends all analogies and . . . being an active rather than an interpretative . . . word, God's Word changes the self rather than disclosing it."⁵⁸

According to one of his ablest evangelical exegetes and critics Kevin Vanhoozer, Ricoeur's narrative theory is best understood in light of his fusion of the projects of Kant and Heidegger. Ricoeur's growing appreciation of the creative imagination in his work on metaphor and narrative leads him to lose his balance while mediating fiction and history, ideal and real, etc. In his later work, there is a weighted focus on the first member of these pairs. Though he strives to overcome several false dichotomies between fiction and history, in the end the Gospels achieve their theological importance as works of the creative imagination. Ricoeur never denies the factuality of the Gospel accounts outright, but it is primarily the meaning of the accounts rather than their factuality that is of greatest human value.⁵⁹

Ricoeur's hermeneutical program recovers the sense rather than the reference of the Biblical text. He is more concerned about defending the meaningfulness of the Biblical texts than the factuality of the events depicted in them. The focus of interpretation is to discern the sense of the text (here Ricoeur and Frei are at one). Ricoeur is concerned to avoid going behind the text to the authorial intent. Rather, meaning is created at the intersection of text and reader "in front" of the text. Wolterstorff criticizes Ricoeur for unnecessarily accepting the disjunction between textual sense and authorial intention:

Why not practice authorial discourse interpretation? Why not interpret with the aim of discerning the authorial discourse of which the text is the medium . . . How could Ricoeur give central importance to authorial discourse in his philosophy of language, and then, in his theory of text interpretation, acknowledge only textual sense interpretation?⁶⁰

Wolterstorff further points out that Ricoeur argues that "poetic" texts do not include "ostensive" reference. The poet does not refer, neither does the writer of a religious text such as the Bible. The text produced has a sense and projects a world; but the discourse of which the text is a medium is

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) 95. See especially his discussion on pages 89–95 which is the conclusion of the work.

⁵⁸ Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith—Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought-Forms*, Vol. 1 (trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 156.

⁵⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 275–289. See also Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 344–378 for an excellent assessment and critique of Ricoeur's hermeneutical theory.

⁶⁰ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* 149.

devoid of reference.⁶¹ When the author is removed from the hermeneutical cartouche, ostensive reference begins to evaporate as well.

The original semantic signs of Scripture are not normative as the inspired and unchanging Word of God for all historical contexts. Ricoeur's hermeneutical method requires that the present meaning of a Biblical text, as it exists for me existentially and for the church corporately in worship, is not tied referentially and objectively to its original historical context. There is no all-embracing hermeneutics of meaning. The fullness of language as it is mediated by religious symbols and myths requires the rejection of precise univocal (literal and objectively true) theology. Ricoeur says: "demythologization is the irreversible gain of truthfulness, intellectual honesty, objectivity."⁶²

Ricoeur's legacy regarding sense and reference undergirds much of the philosophy behind narrative preaching today. Like the postliberal approach of Frei and Lindbeck, what matters is the sense of the text, not so much its ostensive reference.

Ron Allen makes use of Ricoeur for the preacher by describing Ricoeur's

3-phase hermeneutical engagement between preacher and text that captures the transition from the modern to the postmodern epochs in language. In phase one, the preacher encounters the text naively. The preacher assumes the validity of the text. In phase two, the preacher puts the text into the fire of critical reflection, discerning the distance in culture and worldview between the text and the contemporary community . . . In phase three, the preacher is able to return to many texts in a second naiveté. . . . In the deep sense of truth and knowledge, myth and other imaginative expressions of the Christian faith can be true. The details of the Biblical story may not be factually objective from the modern standpoint. But the experience represented in the text is true to our experience.⁶³

Ricoeur's work in narrative undergirds much of what we find in the New Homiletic's approach to narrative preaching today as well. In his essay "The Narrative Function," Ricoeur shows how the concept of plot pulls the reader forward towards the often unpredictable conclusion. Through twists and turns, surprises and counter-expectations, the reader arrives at an understanding of the text and a "point of view." The result of the interaction between speaker and hearer (text and reader) brings about a change in the hearer/reader.⁶⁴ One finds this hermeneutical philosophy played out in virtually all the books on narrative preaching in the past two decades. Unfortunately, in many cases Ricoeur's lack of interest (clarity) regarding the fiction/history issue in narrative is also played out in much of the homiletical literature concerning narrative preaching.

Ricoeur, like Barth, remains a thoroughgoing Kantian. Ron Allen's homiletical application of Ricoeur likewise remains thoroughly Kantian. For Ricoeur (and Allen), the autonomous self continues to control the rules of the

⁶¹ Ibid. 150.

⁶² Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969) 350.

⁶³ Allen, *Theology for Preaching* 168–169.

⁶⁴ Paul Ricoeur, "The Narrative Function," *Semeia* 13 (1978) 177–202.

game. They are both still shackled to Enlightenment modernity. Ricoeur's thought undergirds much of the narrative theology movement as well as the New Homiletic with its emphasis on narrative preaching and its weakened Biblical authority.

V. ON THE ROAD WITH FREI: SENSE AND REFERENCE CONFUSION

There is one final player whose significance must be assessed. As one of a quartet of influential men comprising the "New Yale School of Theology," the other three being Paul Holmer, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey, Hans Frei represents the so-called "postliberal" approach. Frei's two major works, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, have played a major role in the shaping of narrative theology. Frei's work is heavily indebted to Barth; his 1956 doctoral dissertation was entitled "The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism."⁶⁵

We are interested in Frei today for another reason as well. The postliberal school of theology has engendered three books to date attempting to build a homiletical theological structure on its foundation. Mark Ellingsen's *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative* appeared in 1990. Richard Eslinger's *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us* (1995) has a distinctly Frei/Ricoeurian sound to its title. Charles Campbell's recent book *Preaching Jesus: New Directions in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (1997) has fallen like a bombshell on the homiletical house. His work is perhaps the most serious critique to date of the New Homiletic. Campbell argues that most practicing American neo-orthodox theologians are actually closet liberals who have failed to allow Barth to lead them to a new "post-liberal" stance. To the extent that homileticians are influenced by the older neo-orthodox paradigm, their homiletical approach to texts is flawed. Campbell's vision is to ground homiletical theory in the postliberal paradigm of Frei.

Like Barr before him, Frei critiqued the referential confusion which was at the heart of the Biblical Theology movement with its double reference approach to Scripture.⁶⁶ The Bible referred to historical events and to the historically developing communal interpretation of those events. The result was confusion. Frei's colleague at Yale, Brevard Childs, inaugurated what has come to be known as the new Biblical Theology movement. Childs

⁶⁵ See, for example, David E. Demson, *Hans Frei and Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Although the focus is not on Frei's dependence upon Barth, Demson's work clearly indicates Barth's influence.

⁶⁶ The following discussion of Frei is a brief synthesis of his *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and the assessment or critique of a number of other scholars, including Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*; Richard Eslinger, *Narrative and Imagination: Preaching the Worlds that Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Mark Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology* (2d ed.; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995); William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989); Carl Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 NS (1987) 3–19; and Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8 NS (1987) 21–24.

acknowledged his reliance on Barth's approach to Scripture as the way ahead for a revamped Biblical theology approach. Thus, Barth's back seat Biblical theology passengers are back in business with a new theme song: "On the Road Again."

Frei's distinctive contribution was his critique of the historical-critical approach to the texts of Scripture and his advocacy of a literary-critical approach. Frei, like his theological mentor Barth, eschews the dependency upon historical criticism whereby Biblical scholars make history the test of the meaning of the text. His preface outlines his agenda clearly:

It seems to me that Barth's Biblical exegesis is a model of the kind of narrative reading that can be done in the wake of the changes I describe in this book. He distinguishes historical from realistic reading of the theologically most significant Biblical narratives without falling into the trap of instantly making history the test of the meaning of the realistic form of the stories.⁶⁷

Frei's approach is to read the text purely for the sense without any thought for whether it makes ostensive reference to reality outside the text. This fixation on the historical referent of the text is where both historical criticism and conservative evangelicals go wrong. Historical critics assumed—wrongly, according to Frei—that the meaning of a text is its reference. Yet it was believed that many of the events narrated by the Gospel writers did not actually occur in the way they were purported to have occurred in the text. Hence, the liberal approach was to substitute ostensive historical reference for something subjective in the interpreter (Bultmann, Tillich, *et al.*) resulting in a fallback to Romanticism. Conservatives, on the other hand, likewise assumed that the meaning of texts is their reference, and hence argued that they convey historically accurate information about real events. The purpose of the narrative is to engage the reader with those people, events, etc., which served as the text's ostensive reference. For Frei, this approach eclipses the narrative just as much as the historical-critical approach.

Frei's solution lay along the following lines. If one begins with the world of experience as a "modern" person and asks, "Are the Biblical stories true?" then the answer can be "yes" only if either (1) they report accurate history or (2) they reveal or illustrate general lessons about human existence. Some Biblical scholars concluded (wrongly) that many Biblical narratives do not accurately report history. If they were to be true, their meaning could not be in reference to historical events. Scholars then assumed that the only other kind of meaning a story could have was to illustrate some general lesson about human existence, so that this is what the Biblical narratives must mean. Biblical interpreters have ignored the possibility that much of the Bible might "mean" in the way that a realistic narrative does and therefore have distorted the text by trying to find a non-narrative meaning for it.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Frei, *Eclipse* viii.

⁶⁸ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* 161.

Suppose one does not start with the modern world but with the Biblical world and lets those narratives define what is real, so that one's life has meaning to the extent that one fits them into that framework. Then the truth of the Biblical narratives does not depend on connecting them to some other real world. They describe the real world.⁶⁹ Frei insists that the Biblical narratives do not “mean” by referring—either to historical facts or to ontological entities. The meaning of the narrative is the narrative! After this is completed, one may raise the question of truth.

Frei's approach to narrative results in hermeneutical polyphony—there can be a variety of interpretations of a text at the level of the reality referent, because we distinguish textual meaning from reference. Thus, as Campbell points out, a text can be read “literally” and yet the referential status of what is described remains indeterminate and open to a variety of interpretations.⁷⁰ There is a net loss of truth and historicity in this approach.

There is much that is problematic here for conservatives as well as for homiletics. One of the best critiques of Frei from an evangelical perspective remains Carl Henry's article. Henry's article is followed by a four-page response by Frei himself which is most illuminating. Frei longs for a voice between liberalism and evangelicalism but admits that one probably does not exist.⁷¹ Frei makes another admission as well: he is not well-practiced in discussion with evangelical orthodoxy. To this admission I must query, “why not?” Why is it that many within the evangelical camp are reading the postliberals, but from postliberal writings there is seldom evidence of serious interaction with evangelicals? If one were to take a match to the acres and acres of straw men erected concerning evangelicalism in non-evangelical writings, the resulting conflagration would dwarf the great Chicago Fire of 1871.

Donald Bloesch also critiques Frei and narrative theology in his *Holy Scripture*.⁷² Interestingly, his critique is very much in line with that of Carl Henry. If both Henry and Bloesch find cause to question fundamental aspects of Frei's postliberalism, all evangelicals should sit up and take notice, as Knight wryly notes.⁷³

Mark Wallace's *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology* is also well worth reading for an assessment and critique of Frei, Lindbeck, and narrative theology. He aptly sums up the problem of the New Yale theology when he asks,

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* 106–107.

⁷¹ Gary Dorrien's *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (1998) operates on the assumption that such a voice does not exist either. Notice how he subsumes facets of old neo-orthodoxy (which he and others think should be a part of the revamped progressive evangelicalism) by championing Bloesch's position under the heading “Evangelicalism Beyond Modernity: Donald Bloesch's Catholic (Neo)Orthodoxy” (189). I agree with Frei and Dorrien that the middle ground has evaporated, but unlike Ramm, Bloesch, Grenz, Dorrien, and others, I think Barth's approach to Scripture belongs in the right wing of the postliberal camp, not the left wing of the evangelical camp.

⁷² Bloesch, *Holy Scripture* 208–218.

⁷³ Knight, *A Future for Truth* 105.

Is theological discourse something more than a *witness* that instantiates certain grammatical rules (Lindbeck; Holmer), something more than literary *interpretation* of Biblical stories (Frei)? Does not theology also make *assertions* that refer *extra nos* to realities that exist independently of this grammar and these stories? The general answer of the Yale school to this question is that the truth of theological discourse inheres in *how* the discourse is used, not in the realities to which it *refers*. Theological statements are true not because they correspond to reality as such, but because they constitute a “form of life” that coheres with the world of the Biblical texts.⁷⁴

As Bloesch pointed out Frei and narrative theologians are “influenced” by Kant.⁷⁵ I would say further that, because of their dependence on the Kantian paradigm, they are, for the most part, and in spite of their pleading otherwise, shackled to Enlightenment modernity. Frei’s approach has more in common with the old liberal paradigm than has been admitted. After all, it is called “post-liberalism” not post-neo-orthodoxy.

Homiletician David Larsen’s critique of Frei also bears this out. “Frei’s own historical skepticism, the legacy of his modernity, makes us realize that he did not escape cultural influence any more than those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who eclipsed narrative. Frei has eclipsed historicity.”⁷⁶

Nor does Frei particularly endear himself to evangelicals when his comments include such statements as, “Whether or not we know much or anything about the historical Jesus is probably a well-nigh insoluble problem,”⁷⁷ and his reference to Scripture with its “usual pathetic, clumsy interpretation of the spoken word.”⁷⁸

Frei and company’s approach to the narrative structure of the text, its relationship to reality outside of itself, its truth value, etc., have had an immense impact on the field of homiletics. The insights concerning narrative expounded by Ricoeur and Frei form the hermeneutical and theological underpinnings for much of the New Homiletic’s narrative approach to preaching. As we shall see, the New Homiletic, like the older neo-orthodoxy, often disparages the historicity of the text and divorces narrative meaning from historical reference.

VI. ON THE ROAD WITH THE NEW HOMILETIC: LET’S CREATE AN EXPERIENCE⁷⁹

What is the present state of affairs in the house of homiletics relative to Biblical authority? From an evangelical perspective, given the crucial nature

⁷⁴ Wallace, *Second Naiveté* 104.

⁷⁵ *Holy Scripture* 209.

⁷⁶ David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995) 23.

⁷⁷ Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 143.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 165.

⁷⁹ My remarks here and throughout should not be construed as a wholesale rejection of narrative theology or narrative preaching. There are many elements of value in narrative preaching. One must

of authority to preaching, it is somewhat surprising to find that Donald English's 1996 volume on the subject does not even discuss the issue of the authority of Scripture.⁸⁰ However, Peter Adam's book *Speaking God's Words* is an excellent work that covers the subject of Biblical authority, showing just how much one's view of Scriptural authority impacts preaching.

In non-evangelical homiletics, few address the issue at all. However, it is clear that there is an underlying assumption that the evangelical view of Biblical authority has been discredited and needs no ink spilt in refutation. A fixed tenet of the New Homiletic is that discursive, propositional revelation is out. Never mind that this was the unwavering view of the church until this century. Niebuhr and Tillich have single-handedly driven a wedge between propositional and personal revelation, and this dichotomy is uncritically accepted today by most theologians and homileticians.

The birth of the New Homiletic occurred in 1971 when Craddock's *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* was published. He initiated a move away from the so-called "deductive, propositional" approach to a more inductive concept. The goal is the creation of an "experience" in the listener which effects a hearing of the gospel.

Seven years later, Craddock's *Overhearing the Gospel* appeared in which, building on Kierkegaard's concept of communication by indirection, he placed the audience instead of the text in the driver's seat regarding the sermon's purpose. What is that purpose? To effect a pattern for a process whereby the audience can come to hear and act on the gospel as they follow the lead of the preacher. Craddock believed that churches were "saturated" with the gospel content and hence traditional (expository) preaching was not getting the job done. The communication of information was counterproductive in a gospel- and Bible-saturated church community.

In 1985, Craddock's *Preaching* was published, where he furthered his thinking on the importance of the audience for determining what the sermon should be like. The sermon becomes a communication event in which the audience, along with the preacher, co-creates the sermonic experience. Impartation of knowledge is secondary, even tertiary; affecting an experience is primary in Craddock's approach.

Interestingly, in the same year as Craddock's seminal work *As One Without Authority*, Stephen Crites published an article that would prove to be of some significance for theology and homiletics: "The Narrative Quality of Experience."⁸¹ Here Crites placed narrative at the very heart of human life. For the past three decades, in theology as well as many other disciplines, the assumption has been that narrative is the universal condition of human consciousness.

⁸⁰ Donald English, *An Evangelical Theology of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). The title of this book is misleading in that English's work could be considered "evangelical" only in the most liberal use of the term as George Hunter points out in the Foreword.

⁸¹ Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *JAAR* 39 (1971) 291-311.

Theologians began to take note of the fact that much of the Bible is presented in narrative form. Perhaps narrative dominates Scripture because it is the fundamental mode of human existence. God's great plan for humanity is unfolded in a story, in fact, in *the* story—the story of God's redemption through Jesus Christ. Hans Frei's momentous work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* became a major catalyst for those engaged in Biblical studies to re-examine the narratives of Scripture from a literary perspective while bracketing out the question of historicity. The goal became to see the narrative texts as “realistic narrative” and to enter into the world of the texts by conforming one's own world to that of the text.

Thus, partly as a result of the labors of Barth, Ricoeur, and Frei, the Jacobean blessing sought by the New Homiletic seems to have been given in the form of narrative preaching. Like its father, narrative theology, and its mother, narrative hermeneutics, narrative homiletics maintains a strong family resemblance.

There can be little doubt that narrative theology and narrative hermeneutics function as the foundation for narrative homiletics. The shift which Craddock began has been continued by Buttrick and a host of others. In his *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, Buttrick explored how ideas are formed in human consciousness and the role which language plays in the process. Buttrick sees metaphor as fundamental to human consciousness and interpretation of reality. Thus he concludes that the sermon should follow this same rhetorical process and be “essentially metaphorical” as well.⁸² Like Craddock and the practitioners of the New Homiletic, Buttrick's main concern is to effect an experience in the listener.

Buttrick's *A Captive Voice* (1994) drew some criticism from Paul Scott Wilson in a review of the book in the moderately liberal journal *Homiletic*.⁸³ Wilson felt uneasy about Buttrick's distinction between Scripture and word of God “as though the two are somehow separable in tradition, God's word being apart from Scripture that attests to it, or as though we reserve word of God to identify only those passages within Scripture that function for us to speak God's truth.”⁸⁴ But Wilson himself still accepts the old neo-orthodox distinction between words of the Bible and word of God. He cites affirmatively Buttrick's point that Biblical authority in Scripture rests not with its ontological truthfulness as being the word of God but rather is subsumed under the authority of Christ. Evangelicals continue to point out that such a dichotomy between the authority of Scripture and the authority of Christ is unfounded theologically and historically. Wilson sums up his review saying that Buttrick's vision for a twenty-first century homiletic is “the best that we have . . . his dream is biblical” and the book is “thoughtful and wise.”⁸⁵

⁸² Buttrick, *Homiletic* 125.

⁸³ Paul Scott Wilson, “Review of *A Captive Voice*,” *Homiletic* 19/2 (1994) 9–13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 10.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 11.

The shift which has taken place in homiletics was summarized by Thomas Long when he noted that in the past, preaching sought to communicate meaning in a propositional way. Today, a fundamental axiom of most homileticians is that it is the audience and the preacher together who create the experience of meaning.⁸⁶ Reed, Bullock, and Fleeer have shown that the goal of the New Homiletic is to reach the will through the imagination rather than through reason.⁸⁷ It is the privileging of individual experience of narrative and imagination over rational discourse that is the essence of the New Homiletic.⁸⁸

It should not be inferred that discursive reasoning has absolutely no place in the New Homiletic, but rather that it is subordinated to narrative, symbol, metaphor, and the like. The questions of truth and historicity in this schema are secondary to the experience evoked by the sermon which is grounded in a narrative and symbolist approach to preaching.

Thus Ronald Allen can say,

The function of the historical stories (and legends) is not just to recall historical events, but also to make the listeners aware of the meaning of the events so that the listeners will want to appropriate the significance of the stories for themselves. For example, a purpose of the account of the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11) is more than recollecting the day when Jesus was immersed by John in the River Jordan. Using the motifs of the heavens ripping apart, the divine voice and the elusive symbol of the dove, the narrator says, “The new age is beginning. In baptism you become a part of this age!” In preaching from such accounts, our purpose is not to evaluate their historicity but to translate their meaning into terms our congregations will want to appropriate.⁸⁹

The impact exerted by a low view of Biblical authority coupled with the preaching focus on creating an experience can be seen in several places in Allen’s book. Regarding a second-century BC date for Daniel, he says that this would “add little to the homiletical storehouse.”⁹⁰ But Allen misses the point rather badly. If the text purports to be a sixth-century BC document, then to place it in a second-century setting simply because one believes that the prophetic element of the book must be explained other than supernaturally actually takes away from the homiletical storehouse! Likewise, his statement that the events of Daniel 3 (fiery furnace) are not historical negatively impacts one’s preaching of this text.⁹¹ And how can the preaching of the text of Joshua 6 and the fall of Jericho not be severely depleted when Allen says that “Jericho was little more than a village of huts which was

⁸⁶ Thomas Long, “And How Shall They Hear? The Listener in Contemporary Preaching,” in *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (ed. G. R. O’Day and T. Long; Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 167–188.

⁸⁷ Robert Reed, Jeffrey Bullock, and David Fleeer, “Preaching as the Creation of an Experience: The Not-So-Rational Revolution of the New Homiletic,” *Journal of Communication and Religion* 21/2 (1998) 1–9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 7.

⁸⁹ Allen, *Contemporary Interpretation* 52.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 30.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 31.

overrun by the Hebrews.”⁹² Or can you imagine the impact from a sermon when Allen says that “we can no longer determine exactly what happened at the Red Sea. Apparently a small band of Hebrew slaves who were escaping from Egypt were on the verge of capture, perhaps even annihilation, on the shore of the Red Sea. Something made it possible for them to escape.”⁹³ A Barthian approach to revelation coupled with an uncritical acceptance of higher critical methodology creates a net loss of Biblical authority in Allen’s approach to preaching.

A few examples culled from Buttrick’s *A Captive Voice* will suffice to illustrate the negative impact which a Barthian/Ricoeurian paradigm taken to its logical conclusion can have on preaching. Buttrick says that “what the Bible offers is narrative with an elaborate mythic beginning—creation and fall, Cain and Abel, Noah’s ark, the tower of Babel.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, the idea that Scripture is the Word of God is a “groundless notion of Biblical authority.”⁹⁵ He reveals his dependency upon the Barthian paradigm when he says that “neither Scripture nor preaching is word of God per se. The Bible can be God’s word because it can speak redemptively. Otherwise the Bible is no more than a distinguished literary compendium.”⁹⁶ “Christian Preaching must play on ‘the edges of language’ where metaphor brings out redefinitions of human experience.”⁹⁷ “There is no pure gospel; no, not even in the Bible. To be blunt, the Christian Scriptures are both sexist and anti-Semitic.”⁹⁸ Buttrick’s universalism comes through in statements such as the following,

[W]e are starting to realize that the gospel is bigger than something called personal salvation . . . Clearly the Christian Scriptures see Christ as a cosmic savior; he doesn’t just merely save souls, a gnostic heresy at best: he saves the entire human enterprise, indeed, the universe.⁹⁹

“Insurance policy preaching, urging people to come find Jesus and ensure an eternal future, isn’t Christian at all; it is merely an appeal to narrow self-interest.”¹⁰⁰ Finally, I turn to Buttrick’s *The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions* and discover that the resurrection of Jesus apparently was not a literal, bodily, historical event, but rather is the mytho-poetic story of the early church to explain their faith.¹⁰¹ Unless I have misunderstood Buttrick’s treatment of the resurrection, there appears to be little difference in him and Bultmann on the subject.

⁹² Ibid. 33.

⁹³ Ibid. 65.

⁹⁴ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 17.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 30.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 31.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 66–67.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 75.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 108.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 109.

¹⁰¹ David Buttrick, *The Mystery and the Passion: A Homiletic Reading of the Gospel Traditions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

Rather than Buttrick's vision for a twenty-first century homiletic being "the best that we have" according to Paul Scott Wilson above, the opposite is the case when the issue is his understanding and application of Biblical authority to preaching. Rather than "his dream being Biblical," it is in reality a nightmare. Rather than being "thoughtful and wise," one wonders what the apostle Paul might make of it all.

VII. HOMILETICS ON THE POSTBIBLICIST ROAD: A DEAD END?

Edward Farley agrees with Buttrick's negative assessment of the text of Scripture when he says,

In a postbiblicist paradigm of preaching, scripture is the through-which of the sermon not simply in the form of isolated passages. While the passage may serve to explore something in the world of the gospel, more often than not, because of its isolation, it turns the preacher away from the world of the gospel. Scripture as a set of writings is multidimensional. . . . Accordingly, in the new paradigm for preaching, the tyranny of the passage over the sermon will give way to a multivalent use of scripture.¹⁰²

Think of it! A "postbiblicist paradigm of preaching" . . . the "tyranny" of the text of Scripture must be overthrown so as not to "turn the preacher away from the world of the gospel." Something about that statement takes my breath away! Must we be postbiblicist in our homiletic to be postmodern? Is this to be the road upon which homiletics travels in the new millennium? Is there no sure word from God in the text anymore? Is there no "thus saith the Lord"? Is the idea that the words of the Bible are the very speech of God no longer tenable? Cannot the "sense" of the text connect with its reference in a way that is both historical and yet leaves room for the multi-dimensionality of language? Cannot the revelation of God be both propositional and personal at the same time without reducing to a static "propositionalism" or evaporating into an esoteric encounter with the ground of being that has no cognitive content? May we not respect metaphor and narrative in the Scriptures without reducing them to "pure propositions" and at the same time affirm that since they all appear in Scripture God inspired them all? Can we not respect the narrative structure of Scripture without neglecting other discourse genres or placing them on a procrustean bed of narrative? May we not maintain both the Christological center and the doctrinal center of truth while also recognizing that though we know in part, we may in fact know truly? There is, there must be, another road for homiletics than Farley's "postbiblicist" road. Indeed there is —Jeremiah's "old path" (Jeremiah 6:16); a road nowadays less traveled, but once traveled by many.

And what more can I say, for time would fail me to tell of the many who once traveled that road; of Paul, Peter, and John; of Chrysostom and

¹⁰² Edward Farley, "Toward a New Paradigm for Preaching," in *Preaching as a Theological Task* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) 174–175.

Augustine; of Wycliffe, Savanarola, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Whitfield, Knox, Jasper, Moody, Spurgeon, and King, to name only a few, who through preaching subdued kingdoms, stopped the mouths of critics, and launched reformations. Some were beheaded, others were crucified upside down, or exiled on a lonely isle in the Aegean Sea. Some were burned at the stake for their preaching, others languished in prisons, though the word of God which they preached was not bound. Some preached in pulpits, and others in the fields. Some preached under the banner of Calvinism, others under the banner of a more Arminian persuasion. These all died preaching—either with tongue or pen or life. Therefore, seeing we are surrounded by a great cloud of preachers, and laying aside every inadequate view of language and any homiletical approach that does not properly acknowledge Scriptural authority, let us preach the word, having our eyes fixed on Jesus the Logos of God, who is indeed, according to Hebrews 1:1–2, God’s final revelation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

We must once again answer the age-old but crucial question: why is Scripture the Word of God? Although the long answer would take multiple volumes to explicate, the short answer will suffice as a summary at this point. The Scripture itself presents God as its ultimate author not only in texts such as 2 Tim 3:16, but in the fact that “God” and “Scripture” are often viewed by the Biblical writers as interchangeable terms via metonymy when quoting the OT. God is often viewed as the author of a Scriptural citation when he is, in fact, not the speaker (Matt 19:4–5). Likewise, “Scripture says” is a phrase that is sometimes used when God is the direct speaker (Rom 9:17). God is seen by the Biblical writers as the author of all of Scripture. What Scripture says is in fact the Word of God. In at least three places, Paul refers to the Scriptures as God’s speech (Gal 3:8, 22; Rom 9:17). Furthermore, both the form and the content comprise the very Word of God. In other words, the Word comes in words! The writer of Hebrews, when quoting the OT, mentions the human authors only twice, while in all other occurrences it is God or Christ or the Holy Spirit who is speaking (note also the frequent use of the present tense in the citation formulae in Hebrews).

Evangelicals must not allow William Temple to put asunder what God has joined together.¹⁰³ God’s revelation to us is personal, propositional, and inclusive of several other categories (such as metaphor) as well. God’s words are inseparable from his self-revelation. I agree with Peter Adam: “Without God’s words there can be no ministry of the word. . . . The first great theological foundation for preaching, then, is that God has spoken.”¹⁰⁴ God has spoken to us in his Son (Heb 1:1–2), the living Word, and he has spoken to us in the Scriptures, his written Word. If, to use J. I. Packer’s famous

¹⁰³ Temple’s oft-quoted statement appears on page 322 of his *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1934).

¹⁰⁴ Adam, *Speaking God’s Words* 25.

phrase, Scripture is “God preaching,”¹⁰⁵ then the best method of preaching must be that of expository preaching. It would be in this sense that we could affirm the statement found in the Second Helvetic Confession (1566): “The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.”

A high view of Biblical authority creates a solid foundation for expository preaching. Such exposition will respect and reflect the various literary genres in which God was pleased to reveal his Word. But the view of Biblical authority advocated here requires that the umbrella term for preaching today should not be “narrative,” “topical,” or any approach to preaching other than the expository method. Biblical exposition week after week from the pulpit is, as far as I am concerned, the logical outcome of a high view of Biblical authority and the most effective means of fulfilling Paul’s mandate to “preach the Word.”

The way ahead for homiletics is to go back to the fork in the road and take the way marked “Authority of Revelation.” This should be the highway for homiletics in the new millennium. It is the only road that leads to the Father’s house.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost—“The Road Not Taken”

¹⁰⁵ J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 97.