

“RE-IMAGINING” THE PRINCETON MIND:
POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALISM, OLD PRINCETON,
AND THE RISE OF NEO-FUNDAMENTALISM

PAUL KJOSS HELSETH*

I. INTRODUCTION

It has become something of an article of faith in the historiography of American Christianity that the theologians at Old Princeton Seminary were scholastic rationalists whose doctrine of Scripture was shaped by the Scottish Common Sense Realism of the “Didactic Enlightenment” in America.¹ “The standard line,” Roger Schultz notes, “is that in battling the skeptics of the Enlightenment, Scottish realists demanded an extreme (and unbiblical) standard of authority and certainty, and that the Princetonians incorporated this rationalistic element in their inerrantist doctrine of scripture.”² According to the accepted wisdom, then, Old Princeton’s doctrine of inerrancy—the taproot of what is considered to be its rather immodest dogmatism—“is not a Biblical doctrine, but rather a bastard ideology of the Enlightenment”³ that was woven into the fabric of its highly innovative yet thoroughly modern and epistemologically naïve response to “an increasingly secular culture, on the one hand, and a rising liberal Christianity, on the other.”⁴

1. *The postconservative endorsement of the historiographical consensus.* While a growing body of scholarship is establishing that Old Princeton’s indebtedness to the naïve realism of the Scottish philosophy is more imagined than real,⁵ many evangelicals nonetheless endorse the broad outline of the

* Paul Kjoss Helseth is assistant professor of Bible and philosophy at Northwestern College, 3003 Snelling Avenue North, St. Paul, MN 55113-1598.

¹ According to Henry May, the Enlightenment made its way to the American shores primarily in the form of Scottish Common Sense Realism. The Didactic Enlightenment, he argues, was in part a counter-Enlightenment, because it espoused “a variety of thought which was opposed both to skepticism and revolution, but tried to save from what it saw as the debacle of the Enlightenment the intelligible universe, clear and certain moral judgments, and progress” (*The Enlightenment in America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1976] xvi).

² Roger Schultz, “Evangelical Meltdown: The Trouble with *Evangelicalhistoire*,” *Contra Mundum* 2 (Winter 1992): http://www.visi.com/~contra_m/cm/columns/cm02-meltdown.html.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 73; cf. Gary Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 13–47.

⁵ See the literature cited in my published articles on Old Princeton, “B. B. Warfield on the Apologetic Nature of Christian Scholarship: An Analysis of His Solution to the Problem of the Relationship between Christianity and Culture,” *WTJ* 62 (2000) 89–111; “‘Right Reason’ and the Princeton Mind: The Moral Context,” *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 77 (1999) 13–28; “B. B.

standard critique.⁶ Among those who resonate with the historiographical consensus are those ostensibly irenic individuals who presume that the essence of evangelicalism is found not in “propositional truths enshrined in doctrines,” but rather in “a narrative-shaped experience”⁷ that “is more readily ‘sensed’ than described theologically.”⁸ Believing that Christianity is primarily a life and only secondarily a doctrine, these evangelicals lament what Gary Dorrien calls “the fundamentalist evangelical establishment[’s]”⁹ enduring preoccupation with “questions of propositional truth,”¹⁰ for such preoccupation, they contend, is evidence that much of evangelicalism has yet to move beyond the mindset engendered by wrenching struggles of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Indeed, having wed themselves to Old Princeton’s doctrine of inerrancy and thereby to the more divisive tendencies of a scholasticized theology,¹¹ conservative evangelicals, these postconservatives maintain, “have exaggerated the rationalistic dimension of Christian belief”¹² and thus have fallen prey to a kind of theological hubris—even bigotry—that threatens to plunge evangelicalism “back toward fundamentalism.”¹³

Because they are convinced that all cognitive expressions of Christian experience “reflect the particular cultural grid in which they were originally articulated,”¹⁴ and because they consequently agree with Alfred Lord Ten-

Warfield Apologetical Appeal to ‘Right Reason’: Evidence of a ‘Rather Bald Rationalism?’” *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 16 (1998) 156–77; and “The Apologetical Tradition of the OPC: A Reconsideration,” *WTJ* 60 (1998) 109–29.

⁶ For example, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1991); idem, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff; Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1983) 219–64; idem, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870–1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 109–18; idem, “J. Gresham Machen, History, and Truth,” *WTJ* 42 (1979–1980) 157–75; Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) 83–107; idem, “The Princeton Theology,” in *The Princeton Theology* (ed. David F. Wells; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 13–35; Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1996) 169, quoted in Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000) 196.

⁷ Roger E. Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age,” *The Christian Century* (May 3, 1995) 481.

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty-first Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 31.

⁹ Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 10; cf. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 21–35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 26.

¹¹ According to Jack Rogers and Donald McKim, the Princetonians developed a doctrine of Scripture “that would engender continuing strife on the American religious scene” (*The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979] 247).

¹² Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 195.

¹³ Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age” 480, 482. On the “religious bigotry” of those who insist upon drawing distinct boundaries between theological views that are considered to be acceptable and unacceptable, see the comments of Robert Webber in James R. and Elizabeth Newby, *Between Peril and Promise* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 111.

¹⁴ Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber, *What Christians Believe: A Biblical and Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) ix–x.

nyson that “Our little systems have their day . . . and thou, O Lord, are more than they,”¹⁵ postconservative evangelicals therefore advocate a “revisioning” of the theological task along the lines of “the postliberal research program.”¹⁶ Evangelicalism will become something more than “fundamentalism with good manners,”¹⁷ they contend, only when evangelicals recognize that doctrines are not “timeless and culture-free” summaries of biblical truth that form the cognitive foundation of faith.¹⁸ Rather, they are “reflection[s] on the faith of the converted people of God whose life together is created and shaped by the paradigmatic narrative embodied in scripture.”¹⁹ Doctrines, as such, are not to be afforded the same exalted status as the experiential “ethos” that unites the disparate elements of the evangelical community into a single body of faith.²⁰ Rather, they must be treated as those secondary reflections on Christian experience “that reflect and guide the converted community of God’s people.”²¹

2. *The unsustainability of the historiographical consensus and the crumbling foundation of non-foundational theology.* Whatever the merits of postconservatism’s move away from a “propositionalist understanding of the theological enterprise”²² toward a “narrativist-communitarian model” of theology might be,²³ there is no disputing that postconservatives justify this transition in part by rejecting what they regard as the “Enlightenment foundationalist rationalism” of the Princeton Theology.²⁴ “Beneath and behind the postconservatives’ approach to theology,” Roger Olson argues, “lies a growing discontent with evangelical theology’s traditional ties to what Wheaton historian Mark Noll describes as the ‘evangelical Enlightenment,’ especially common-sense realism.”²⁵ While most postconservatives acknowledge that the Princeton theologians were not fundamentalists themselves,²⁶ they nonetheless argue that Old Princeton’s scholastic rationalism—itsself the necessary byproduct of the Princetonians’ somewhat credulous endorsement

¹⁵ Tennyson, “In Memoriam,” <http://charon.sfsu.edu/tennyson/inmemoriam.html>.

¹⁶ Cf. F. LeRon Shults, “Truth Happens? The Pragmatic Conception of Truth and the Postliberal Research Program,” *Princeton Theological Review* 4 (1997) 26–36.

¹⁷ Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 9.

¹⁸ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 67.

¹⁹ Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age” 481.

²⁰ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 30–35.

²¹ Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age” 481.

²² Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 67.

²³ Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 195.

²⁴ Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 70; cf. Rodney Clapp, “How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals Be Nonfoundationalists?” in *The Nature of Confession* (ed. Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 83–84. For an excellent discussion of foundationalism, see Millard J. Erickson, “Foundationalism: Dead or Alive?” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 5 (2001) 20–33.

²⁵ Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicals Greet the Postmodern Age” 481; cf. Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 71; Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* 83–107.

²⁶ For example, see Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) 556–61; Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 79.

of Scottish Realism²⁷—was “mediated” to contemporary evangelicalism through the fundamentalism of the early twentieth century.²⁸ Turn-of-the-century fundamentalists endorsed Old Princeton’s doctrine of inerrancy and thereby accommodated the legacy of Protestant scholastic rationalism, post-conservatives contend, and this legacy, in turn, has been passed on to all those whose decidedly cognitive concerns lead them to seek “an invulnerable foundation for theology in an error-free Bible, viewed as the storehouse for divine revelation.”²⁹ “Nowhere is neo-evangelicalism’s genesis in fundamentalism more evident,” Grenz concludes, “than in its theology. The fundamentalist acceptance of the Princeton understanding of inspiration . . . gave a particular nineteenth-century cast to neo-evangelicalism’s emphasis on biblical authority.”³⁰

It is the contention of this essay that, however warranted postconservatism’s repudiation of “evangelical propositionalism”³¹ might be for any one of a number of different reasons, it cannot be justified by appealing to the scholastic rationalism of Old Princeton, simply because the Princeton theologians were not scholastic rationalists. While they certainly were the methodological disciples of Francis Turretin and consequently conceived of theology as that “science” having to do with God,³² they were nonetheless not beholden for their epistemology to scholasticism or Enlightenment rationalism in a formative sense. For not only did they recognize that objective as well as subjective factors are of critical importance to the life of the mind, but they also based their theology on the combination of head and heart, of “cognitive-doctrinal” and “practical-experiential” factors that post-conservatives themselves insist is of defining significance to the mainstream of the evangelical tradition.³³

Thus, in order to challenge the viability of a major component of post-conservatism’s justification for repudiating the “evangelical establishment’s” conception of the theological task, what I undertake in the following discussion is an analysis of important scholarship that buttresses a point that I have attempted to make in other places, a point that calls into question the alleged philosophical connection between scholastic rationalism and the Princeton Theology.³⁴ That point, in short, is that Old Princeton’s emphasis

²⁷ For example, see Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 73; Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* 558; Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 23–28.

²⁸ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 65–72.

²⁹ Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 70; see also pp. 70–84.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 83. For a noteworthy response to this contention, see Kenneth J. Stewart, “That Bombshell of a Book: Gaussen’s *Theopneustia* and Its Influence on Subsequent Evangelical Theology,” paper presented at the Wheaton Theology Conference, Spring 2001, 15–18. Stewart suggests that since 1950, “Evangelical thinking about the Bible has, without our realizing it, been in process of necessary recovery [not from the influence of Warfield and Old Princeton, but] from the exaggerated emphases of [Gaussen’s] *Theopneustia*.”

³¹ Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 65.

³² Cf. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1 (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) 1–3.

³³ Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 84 (cf. 44–47); *idem*, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 22–26; see also Roger E. Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology,” *Christianity Today* 42/2 (February 9, 1998) 42.

³⁴ See the articles cited in note 5 above.

upon “right reason” and the primacy of the intellect in faith is not evidence that the Princeton theologians were covert, if not overt, rationalists, and the purveyors of a theology that was scholasticized by an “alien philosophy.”³⁵ It is evidence, rather, that they stood in the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and thereby in the mainstream of the evangelical tradition.³⁶ As such, the discussion below is a call, of sorts, for evangelicals to reassess or “re-imagine” the standard interpretation of the Princeton mind, so that jaded conclusions are corrected and potentially troublesome consequences are avoided.³⁷ When evangelicals undertake such an examination, they will discover that a “superficial reading” of the Princetonians will make them appear “considerably more rationalistic” than they really were.³⁸ They will also conclude, as I do in the concluding section of this essay, that conservatism’s postconservative critics—having rejected a caricature of Old Princeton

³⁵ This is the general theme of John Vander Stelt’s *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study of Old Princeton and Westminster Theology* (Marlton, NJ: Mack, 1978). The Dutch and Neo-Orthodox branches of the Reformed camp generally agree with this critique of Old Princeton, as do the post-conservative scholars with whom I am familiar. Contemporary interpreters who endorse this critique are indebted in one way or another to Sydney Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology,” *Church History* 24 (1955) 257–72. See, for example, Ernest Sandeen, “The Princeton Theology: One Source of Biblical Literalism in American Protestantism,” *Church History* 31 (1962) 307–21; and Samuel Pearson, “Enlightenment Influence on Protestant Thought in Early National America,” *Encounter* 38 (Summer 1977) 193–212. Older studies that are critical of the “intellectualism” of Old Princeton include Ralph Danhof, *Charles Hodge as Dogmatician* (Goes, The Netherlands: Oosterbaan and le Cointre, 1929); John O. Nelson, “The Rise of the Princeton Theology: A Generic History of American Presbyterianism Until 1850” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1935); William Livingstone, “The Princeton Apologetic as Exemplified by the Work of Benjamin B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen: A Study of American Theology, 1880–1930” (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1948).

³⁶ Obviously, I think that the Reformed interpretation of the history of evangelicalism is largely correct. I recognize, however, that the issues involved are complex, which is why I like what Douglas A. Sweeney has to say about the matter: “When the historiographical wrangling ends and the dust settles, it may well be seen that ‘Reformed’ and ‘Holiness’ themes, indeed Calvinist/forensic/confessional and Arminian/realistic/revivalist themes, have been functioning dialectically all along (for better and for worse) in both evangelical history and evangelical historiography. In evangelical history, Arminianism and Wesleyanism (even Pentecostalism, though less directly) have arisen, not in seclusion, but from within Reformed Protestantism. They were not intended as radically new alternatives but as correctives to trends prevalent among other more established members of the Reformed family. Likewise in recent evangelical historiography, [Donald] Dayton and the Holiness camp have offered criticisms of and provided helpful correctives to trends prevalent within the more established Reformed paradigm” (“Historiographical Dialectics: On Marsden, Dayton, and the Inner Logic of Evangelical History,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23/1 [1993] 52). For an overview of the debate over the essential character of Evangelicalism, see the entire issues of the *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23/1 (1993) and *Modern Reformation* 10/2 (March/April 2001). See also the recent “Reflection and Response” involving Michael S. Horton and Roger E. Olson in *Christian Scholar’s Review* 31/2 (2001) 131–68.

³⁷ Just as the “Re-Imagining God” conference was convened in Minneapolis in 1993 so that progressive scholars could rethink how to conceive of the ultimate reality in the universe in our day based on the conviction that traditional conceptions of “god” were stifling the religious vitality of “communities of faith” (cf. Peter Jones’s description of the festive atmosphere in *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* [Mukilteo, WA: WinePress Publishing and Escondido, CA: Main Entry Editions, 1997] 142–45), so too evangelicals must re-imagine the standard interpretation of the Princeton mind, so that the voice of the Princetonians is given a fair hearing in our day.

³⁸ Peter Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge: A 19th Century Evangelical Approach to Reason, Knowledge and Truth* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1997) 115.

rather than the views of the Princetonians themselves—are themselves guilty of some of the worst features that they perceive in their conservative brethren.

II. “RE-IMAGINING” THE PRINCETON MIND: THE AUGUSTINIAN OR NON-SCHOLASTIC NATURE OF “RIGHT REASON”

1. *The Rogers and McKim thesis: simply false.* Any attempt to reassess the standard interpretation of the Princeton mind must demonstrate at least a basic awareness of the Rogers and McKim thesis, in part because recent critiques—including those of postconservative and Neo-Orthodox theologians—cite their conclusions favorably.³⁹ In *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, Jack Rogers and Donald McKim argue that the Princeton theologians were not the genuine heirs of the central Christian tradition that they claimed to be in part because their distinctively Reformed commitments were jettisoned by their philosophical assumptions. While the Princetonians were convinced that their view of the Bible was that of orthodox believers throughout the history of the church, in fact their doctrine of Scripture was shaped by their reverence for Turretin and their “uncritical acceptance” of the Scottish philosophy.⁴⁰ These factors not only led them to adopt “wholeheartedly the naïve inductive method of Bacon,” but they also conspired to reverse in their thinking the Augustinian approach of “faith seeking understanding as a theological method.”⁴¹ Indeed, they had an “unbounded confidence” in the competence of human reasoning powers,⁴² yet they failed to recognize that this confidence was fundamentally at odds with the theological commitments of the central Christian tradition. According to Rogers and McKim,

Despite the constant profession of faithfulness to Calvin and the Augustinian tradition, the Princeton theologians seemed never to fear that their minds had been affected by sin. Their later followers worked out the full implications of this faculty psychology. The Princeton men were sure that sin had made the emotions unreliable. But they held an almost Pelagian confidence that the mind was essentially undisturbed by sin’s influence.⁴³

If Rogers and McKim are correct, then, Old Princeton’s understanding of the place of Scripture in the central Christian tradition was informed not by sound scholarly analysis, but rather by tendentious historical scholarship that was colored by the assumptions of Enlightenment philosophy. This philosophy lent itself to Old Princeton’s narrow apologetical concerns, which culminated, as Rogers suggests in a later essay, in B. B. Warfield’s rational-

³⁹ For example, cf. Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 77; Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* 566, 639 n. 23; Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 215 n. 19.

⁴⁰ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 289.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 289, 296 (cf. 269, 289–90).

⁴² *Ibid.* 245; see also Lefferts Loetscher, *The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church Since 1869* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957) 70.

⁴³ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 290.

istic appeal “to the *natural man’s* ‘right reason’ to judge of the truth of Christianity.”⁴⁴ It also subverted the Princetonians’ standing in the Augustinian tradition, for it turned them into scholastic rationalists who were indifferent to the role that subjective and experiential factors play in religious epistemology, and who, as a consequence, “self-consciously and carefully followed the Thomistic order that reason had to precede faith.”⁴⁵

An important piece of scholarship that challenges the assumptions behind this line of argumentation is the examination of Charles Hodge’s philosophy by Peter Hicks. Although Hicks’s analysis has yet to make much of an impact upon the historiography of the Princeton Theology, it makes a number of important points that call into question prevailing assumptions about Old Princeton, and which, as such, are relevant to the thesis of this essay.⁴⁶ In *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge: A 19th Century Evangelical Approach to Reason, Knowledge and Truth*, Hicks argues that although the

⁴⁴ Rogers, “Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confession,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 154.

⁴⁵ Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 296. In personal correspondence, Stanley Grenz suggests that Old Princeton’s theological method is problematic not primarily because of its “dependence” upon the Scottish philosophy (“although this is not to be discounted”), but because of its “indebtedness to the method of empirical science . . . inherited from the Enlightenment, which led [the Princetonians] . . . to model theology on the pattern of the natural sciences. This legacy in turn was passed on to neo-evangelicalism via fundamentalism,” and neo-evangelicals then elevated this program “to normative status” (Stanley J. Grenz to Paul Kjoss Helseth, November 21, 2001). While I welcome Grenz’s eagerness to downplay the significance of Scottish Common Sense Realism, I wonder if taking the focus off of the Scottish philosophy and placing it on Old Princeton’s inductive method hurts rather than helps his critique. According to the historiographical consensus the Princetonians “modeled theology on the pattern of the natural sciences” *precisely because* their accommodation of Scottish Common Sense Realism jettisoned their commitment to the distinctive emphases of Reformed orthodoxy, including the noetic effects of sin. Although I disagree with this consensus I nonetheless acknowledge that if the Princetonians in fact were “dependent” upon the Scottish philosophy, then their employment of an inductive method was extremely problematic because it was then simply the practical outworking of warmed-over humanism. Thus, by downplaying the significance of Scottish Common Sense Realism, I wonder if Grenz is downplaying the primary reason for being opposed to an inductive method in the first place. As far as I can tell, the problem is not an inductive method *per se*, but an inductive method that has been tainted by humanistic philosophical assumptions. What I am trying to establish in this essay is that since the Princetonians themselves were not unduly influenced by such assumptions, one cannot repudiate their approach to doing theology by repudiating the methodological indiscretions of those who in fact have sacrificed the theological integrity of Old Princeton’s method to the assumptions of an essentially humanistic philosophy. To state the matter clearly, I would suggest that if there is in fact a problem with “a propositionalist understanding of the theological enterprise,” it is not to be found in the consistently Reformed understanding of the Princetonians, but in the latent humanism of their latter-day friends, especially their latter-day Arminian friends. On the relationship between humanism, Scottish Common Sense Realism, and the historiography of American Christianity, cf. Helseth, “‘Right Reason’ and the Princeton Mind” 19–21.

⁴⁶ According to John W. Stewart, Hicks’s work addresses three important “lacunae” in the current scholarship about Hodge: first, “the degree to which Hodge may be characterized properly as a rationalist”; second, the nature of Hodge’s relationship to Schleiermacher and other nineteenth century romantic thinkers; and third, “Hodge’s understanding—and eventual dismissal—of Immanuel Kant” (review of *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* by Peter Hicks, in *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 77/1 [Spring 1999] 64–65).

Princeton theologians used ideas and expressions that were “influenced by” the Scottish philosophy, “there is no indication in their writings that they saw it as in any way binding, or that they saw [Thomas] Reid, for instance, as the ‘pure’ form by which subsequent deviations were to be tested.”⁴⁷ Indeed, while they agreed with the Scottish philosophers that truth exists objectively, that truth is a unity, and that we can have real, though partial, knowledge of it, “it would seem from the evidence that the Princetonians did not hold this position because Reid and his followers taught it; rather, they accepted the Scottish philosophy because it concurred with their fundamental epistemology.”⁴⁸ At the foundation of their thinking about knowledge, Hicks suggests, was the conviction that “the basis of epistemological realism” is “theological rather than philosophical.”⁴⁹ That is to say, while the Princetonians “[were] able to agree with the Scottish philosophers that ‘it is universally admitted that we have no foundation for knowledge or faith, but the veracity of consciousness’ [their] own conviction went one stage deeper: ‘The ultimate ground of faith and knowledge is confidence in God.’”⁵⁰ God, the Princetonians argued, is not only “the creator and controller of the world and so guarantor of its ontological stability and epistemological coherence.”⁵¹ More importantly, he is the author of our nature who has made us “capable of accurate belief about the external world and who would not let us be deceived.”⁵² For Hicks, therefore, the Princeton theologians endorsed certain elements of the Scottish philosophy neither for purely speculative nor for merely apologetical reasons, but rather because those elements were “a useful means of expressing principles that had their origin in [the Princetonians’] theological convictions.”⁵³ The Princeton theologians were “sophisticated theological realists” rather than “naïve theological realists,” Hicks concludes, and as such they were convinced that we can have real knowledge of God and of the external world because God has condescended to make himself and the contents of his mind known “in his works, in our nature, in the Bible, and in Christ,” and because “we have been made deliberately by the creator of the world, and have been endowed with means of obtaining accurate information about that world.”⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 206, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 166.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 167 (cf. 206).

⁵² *Ibid.* 168.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 167.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 191, 167. According to Hicks,

Naïve theological realism is the position of most unphilosophical people, past and present. If truth about God exists it may be known in essentially the same way as truth about anything else. Though it may be harder to believe, the statement ‘God loves you’ is not radically different from the statement “John loves Mary.” We know how to use the words involved. We accept God is different from John and that his love will be appropriately different, but the logic of the two sentences appears to be identical. In a parallel way our knowledge of God is accepted by the naïve theological realist as on the same model as

2. *The epistemological context: the unitary operation of the “whole soul.”* How, then, has God made us, and why can we legitimately conclude that Old Princeton’s epistemological assumptions—“especially in the sphere of religion”⁵⁵—in no way suggest accommodation to scholastic rationalism? One of the most important aspects of Hicks’s analysis is his repeated assertion that Hodge did not divide the soul “into various faculties or aspects,” but rather conceived of the soul as a whole or integrated “unit” that acts in all of its functions—its thinking, its feeling, and its willing—as a single substance.⁵⁶ While this “unified anthropology” was “very much at odds with the current faculty concepts that were based on two centuries of rationalism and Scottish Common Sense Philosophy,” Hodge nonetheless insisted, following Scripture, that our intellects and our wills “are not detachable parts of us which can operate in isolation from each other,” but rather are faculties or powers that act as a single unit in response to the governing disposition of the soul.⁵⁷ “The Scriptures do not contemplate the intellect, the will, and the affections, as independent, separable elements of a composite whole,” he argued. “These faculties are only different forms of activity in one and the same subsistence.”⁵⁸

It is this rejection of the faculty psychology, then, that is, this conviction that our intellects and our wills “are neither independent nor distinct”⁵⁹ but

our knowledge of John, or of the “numinousness” of a Gothic cathedral. We know what we mean by John, or the numinous, or God, and we know what we mean by saying we know, whether it is in the sense of being acquainted with, or being aware of, John, the numinous, or God.

Sophisticated theological realism would agree that there is a close relationship between ordinary knowledge and religious knowledge. But it would want to reverse the direction of the presentation. Granted, it would claim, that in experience our knowledge of ordinary things provides the model for our knowledge of the divine, nevertheless in reality the reverse is the case. We can have knowledge because knowledge is something that has prior existence in God. Our knowledge is modeled on his knowledge. He is a God who knows, and he has created us able to know. We might cite as a parallel the case of divine love. For us experientially, human love is primary. We learn of it from our human parents, and then only later learn to project what we know on the human level on to God. But in reality love is primary in God; it can be experienced on the human level because the creator has chosen to incorporate into his creation aspects of what already existed in the divine being. So while our knowledge of love starts with the human and rises to the divine, the true movement is in the other direction. Our experience of love moves not from the real to the metaphysical, but from the copy or the derived to the original. The love of God is the reality that lies behind and the fulfilling of all that we have tasted in the lesser loving of our human experience (ibid. 191–92).

⁵⁵ Ibid. 107.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 175, 174; cf. Charles Hodge, “Free Agency,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 29 (January 1857) 115; Charles Hodge, “My Son, Give Me Thy Heart,” in *Princeton Sermons: Outlines of Discourses, Doctrinal and Practical* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Paternoster Row, 1879) 131; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1872–73; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982) 2.255.

⁵⁷ Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 175, 17.

⁵⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3.16; cf. Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 173.

⁵⁹ Charles Hodge, “The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord,” in *Princeton Sermons* 214.

are both expressions of an integrated whole that is “the thinking, feeling, and willing subject in man,”⁶⁰ that suggests at least three factors that are of critical importance to our analysis of the Princeton mind. In the first place, Hodge’s unified anthropology suggests that he conceived of reason in a “broad” and not in a narrow sense,⁶¹ and that he consequently acknowledged that a true or “right” understanding of whatever is apprehended by the mind involves more than just a movement of the rational faculty. Indeed, he recognized that since “[t]here is always an exercise of will in thought, and an exercise of feeling in cognition,” a true or “right” understanding of what is rationally perceived involves “not mere intellectual apprehension . . . It includes also the proper apprehension . . . [of an object’s] qualities; and if those qualities be either esthetic (*sic*) or moral, it includes the due apprehension of them and the state of feeling which answers to them.”⁶² That Hodge conceived of cognition as an activity involving the whole soul is perhaps nowhere more succinctly manifest than in a sermon on knowing Christ. “The knowledge of Christ,” he argued, “. . . is not the apprehension of what he is, simply by the intellect, but also a due apprehension of his glory as a divine person arrayed in our nature, and involves not as its consequence merely, but as one of its elements, the corresponding feeling of adoration, delight, desire and complacency.”⁶³

If Hodge’s emphasis upon the unitary operation of the soul suggests that cognition is an activity involving both the intellect and the will, it also suggests that it is a moral rather than a merely rational enterprise. It also suggests, in other words, that the extent to which truth is apprehended by the mind and then followed in life is ultimately determined not by the rational power of the intellect alone, but rather by the moral character of the knowing agent. That this is the case, and that Hodge “combined both intellectual apprehension and moral response in the notion of knowledge,”⁶⁴ is clearly revealed in his endorsement of the classical Reformed distinction between a merely “speculative” and a “spiritual” understanding of the gospel, the distinction that grounds his insistence that the teaching of the Spirit is necessary “in order to the right understanding of the Scriptures.”⁶⁵ While Hodge was convinced that the unregenerate can entertain “correct intellectual convictions”⁶⁶ about the truth of Scripture because they can apprehend that truth in a “speculative” or merely rational sense, he nonetheless insisted that they cannot “come to the knowledge of the truth”⁶⁷ because they

⁶⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2.46.

⁶¹ Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 99.

⁶² Hodge, “The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord” 214. Cf. Charles Hodge, “The Necessity of the Spirit’s Teaching in order to the Right Understanding of the Scriptures,” in *Princeton Sermons* 75–77; Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 100, 107–8, 206.

⁶³ Hodge, “The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord” 214.

⁶⁴ Hicks, *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 175.

⁶⁵ Hodge, “The Necessity of the Spirit’s Teaching in order to the Right Understanding of the Scriptures” 75–77; Hodge, “The Excellency of the Knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord” 214–15.

⁶⁶ Charles Hodge, “The Indwelling of the Spirit,” in *Princeton Sermons* 77.

⁶⁷ Hodge, “The Necessity of the Spirit’s Teaching in order to the Right Understanding of the Scriptures” 77, 76.

“cannot know the things of the Spirit.”⁶⁸ They can neither discern the beauty nor taste the sweetness of the truth that they can rationally perceive,⁶⁹ in other words, because a moral defect “in the organ of vision”⁷⁰ prevents a “true” or “right” apprehension of the truth that is presented to their consciousness.⁷¹

The regenerate, on the other hand, can discern the “spiritual excellence”⁷² of what is apprehended by their minds because they have the moral ability to “see and love the beauty of holiness.”⁷³ Indeed, they can “know the things of the Spirit”⁷⁴ because they were infused with “a new spiritual principle” in regeneration,⁷⁵ and as a consequence they “embrace [the truth] with assurance and delight”⁷⁶ because they “see truth to be truth, to be excellent, lovely and divine.”⁷⁷ That “right knowledge as well as right feeling . . . are inseparable effects of a work that affects the whole soul” and that certainly leads to saving faith is made clear in a sermon on delighting in the Law of God.⁷⁸ Delighting in the Law of God, Hodge argued,

. . . is peculiar to the spiritual man, and is due to the influence of the Spirit. This influence is two-fold, or produces a two-fold effect. *First*, a subjective change in the state of the mind analogous to opening the eyes of the blind. It is such a change as imparts the power of spiritual vision, *i.e.*, the vision of the spiritual excellence of divine things. . . . *Second*, it produces a revelation of the truth, a presentation of it to the mind in its true nature and relations. This is

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, “Delighting in the Law of God,” in *Princeton Sermons* 249.

⁶⁹ Cf. Charles Hodge, “The Inability of Sinners,” in *Theological Essays: Reprinted from the Princeton Review* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846) 270; Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2.261.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 3.51.

⁷¹ Cf. Charles Hodge, *The Way of Life*, Introduction by Mark A. Noll (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1841; reprint, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987) 60; Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2:234; Hodge, “The Inability of Sinners” 269–71.

⁷² Hodge, “The Necessity of the Spirit’s Teaching in order to the Right Understanding of the Scriptures” 76.

⁷³ Charles Hodge, “Regeneration, and the Manner of its Occurrence,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 2 (1830) 285.

⁷⁴ Hodge, “Delighting in the Law of God” 249.

⁷⁵ Charles Hodge, “Regeneration,” in *Princeton Sermons* 136.

⁷⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 3.71.

⁷⁷ Charles Hodge, “Evidences of Regeneration,” in *Princeton Sermons* 138. Note that there is a certain relationship between seeing and believing in Hodge’s thought because of the internal work of the Spirit on the “whole soul” of a moral agent (cf. Helseth, “‘Right Reason’ and the Princeton Mind” 21–23). Note as well that, while Hodge clearly affirmed the primacy of the intellect in faith, he was unyielding in his insistence that the whole soul is the subject of the Spirit’s influence. As such, he rejected “what has been called the ‘light system,’ which teaches that men are regenerated by light or knowledge, and that all that is needed is that the eyes of the understanding should be opened. As the whole soul is the subject of original sin the whole soul is the subject of regeneration. A blind man cannot possibly rejoice in the beauties of nature or art until his sight is restored. But, if uncultivated, the mere restoration of sight will not give him the perception of beauty. His whole nature must be refined and elevated. So also the whole nature of apostate man must be renewed by the Holy Ghost; then his eyes being opened to the glory of God in Christ, he will rejoice in Him with joy unspeakable and full of glory. But the illumination of the mind is indispensable to holy feelings, and is their proximate cause” (Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 2.263).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 3.36.

a special work of the Spirit. . . . The effect of these operations of the Spirit is delighting in the law of God, which includes,

1. An apprehension of its truth and consequent conviction of its divine origin.
2. An apprehension of its excellence, of its purity, of its justice, and its goodness. It is seen to be right, to be morally glorious.
3. An experience of its power to convince, to sanctify, to console, to guide, to render wise unto salvation; an experience of its appropriateness to our necessities. It is seen to suit our nature as rational beings, as moral beings, as sinners.
4. An acquiescence in it, and rejoicing in it, as an exhibition of the character of God, of the rule of duty, of the plan of salvation, of the person and work of Christ, and of the future state. The Scriptures, therefore, are the treasury of truth; the store-house of promises; the granary of spiritual food; the never-failing river of life.⁷⁹

Finally and most importantly, Hodge's emphasis upon the unitary operation of the soul suggests that he conceived of reason in an Augustinian rather than in a scholastic sense, and thus is not properly regarded as a scholastic rationalist. Although this contention certainly challenges the historiographical consensus, it is largely confirmed by an unlikely source, namely the historical analysis of the Westminster Confession of Faith by Jack Rogers. In *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism*, Rogers alleges that the Princeton theologians "did not develop an historically valid interpretation of Scripture in the Westminster Confession," in part because they failed to interpret the Confession in light of "the distinctively British background which . . . informed the thinking of the Westminster Divines and which created the context in which they thought and wrote."⁸⁰ Whereas the Princetonians interpreted the Confession in light of the "Aristotelian and Scholastic" assumptions of "later Continental Reformed orthodoxy" and thus underemphasized "the witness of the Spirit and the saving purpose of Scripture in their formulation of the doctrine of Scripture," the Westminster Divines, being "both Puritans and Calvinists," "placed primary emphasis" on these "motifs" because they drew heavily on "an anti-Aristotelian Augustinianism"⁸¹ that was "a deep-rooted tradition carried on in the Puritan party."⁸²

One of the "principal threads" in this "anti-Aristotelian Augustinianism," Rogers argues, and thus one of the primary influences that distinguished the Westminster Divines from their more scholastic counterparts both in England and on the Continent, was "the presence of an Augustinian conception of 'right reason.'⁸³ While those who followed Aquinas conceived

⁷⁹ Hodge, "Delighting in the Law of God" 249–50.

⁸⁰ Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967) 448, 438.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 438, 449, 220, 449, 438.

⁸² Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 202.

⁸³ Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* 82, 438. According to Robert Hoopes, the author of the most extensive study on the concept of "right reason" to date, the concept of "right

of “right reason” as a faculty that “was implanted by God in all men, Christian and heathen alike, as a guide to truth and conduct,”⁸⁴ those who followed Augustine insisted that the regenerate alone “may rise to an understanding of the truth”⁸⁵ because the regenerate alone have the moral ability to see revealed truth for what it objectively is, namely glorious. Although those who followed Augustine acknowledged that there is a logical or temporal priority of the intellect in faith and thus were not “irrationalists” in any sense of the term, nevertheless they refused to give reason “a sphere of primary authority . . . in religious matters” because they recognized that the intellect and the will work together as a single substance in response to the governing inclination of the soul.⁸⁶ Indeed, they recognized that there is an intimate connection between the unitary operation of the soul and the quality of the reception of revealed truth, and as a consequence they insisted that the ability to apprehend revealed truth in something more than a merely speculative sense necessitates that the depravity “of both intellect and will” be taken away “by the power of God.”⁸⁷

For the followers of Augustine, therefore, “right reason” is not a faculty all human beings possess that forms the epistemological foundation for a natural theology and a naïve approach to evidentialist apologetics. Rather, it is an epistemological ability of the regenerated soul “which acknowledges the authority of God and which functions for moral, not [merely] speculative ends.”⁸⁸

reason” was born in classical Greece when Socrates advanced the notion that “virtue and knowledge are identical” (*Right Reason in the English Renaissance* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962] 1). As an epistemological concept that was “assimilated by the early Church Fathers and redefined in the Christian context of sin and grace” (p. 1), the concept was controlled by two formative convictions. Not only did it advance the notion that there is a realm of absolute or non-subjective truth that “includes both intellectual and moral truths” (p. 4), but more importantly it recognized that in order for men to know this truth “they must themselves become good” (p. 6). According to Hoopes, “wherever classical and Christian humanists speak of the achievement of true knowledge . . . they invariably speak of a certain transformation that must take place in the character of the knower before that knowledge can be attained. . . . Since Truth in its totality is at once intellectual and moral in nature, the conditions of wisdom are for men both intellectual and moral. True knowledge, i.e., knowledge of Truth, involves the perfection of the knower in both thought and deed” (p. 5). How, though, do men become good so that they can then know what is true? In his incisive analysis of Hoopes’s work, Rogers correctly notes that the concept of “right reason” developed along two different lines in the Christian world, in large measure because differing anthropologies led to different answers to this question (*Scripture in the Westminster Confession* 84). While those who followed Aquinas emphasized the “essential goodness” of man and consequently conceived of “right reason” as a faculty that all possess, Augustine took the reality of original sin and the need for regenerating grace seriously and thus insisted that the regenerate alone can reason “rightly.” For a more recent examination of this concept, see William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁸⁴ Douglas Bush, *Paradise Lost in Our Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1945) 37. Cf. Hoopes, *Right Reason* 3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 64. Cf. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* 83.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 230, 86, 85.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 232.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 231.

Whereas Rogers and McKim⁸⁹ would have us believe that Hodge's assimilation of the Scottish philosophy subverted his commitment to an Augustinian understanding of "right reason" and turned him into a scholastic rationalist who afforded reason "an independent sphere of operation prior to faith," in fact his understanding of "right reason" is remarkably similar to that of the Westminster Divines.⁹⁰ For not only did he recognize that reasoning itself is an inherently moral enterprise involving all the powers of the soul, but he also acknowledged that the extent to which truth is apprehended by the mind and then followed in life is ultimately determined by the moral character of the knowing agent. This suggests, in short, that "it [is] inappropriate to categorize Hodge as a doctrinaire rationalist or a curmudgeonly scholastic,"⁹¹ for he stood with the Westminster Divines in the mainstream of an epistemological tradition that was, as Rogers himself insists, "quite clearly" opposed to the rationalism of the scholastic tradition.⁹²

3. *Postconservatism's misunderstanding of the Princeton mind.* If we assume, for the purposes of this essay, that Hodge's epistemological assumptions are representative of those of the best thinkers in the Princeton tradition, then we have grounds for concluding that Postconservatism's repudiation of Old Princeton's "propositionalist understanding of the theological enterprise" is based upon at least two profound misunderstandings of the Princeton mind. The first has to do with the alleged rationalism of the Princeton theologians. Whereas postconservatives follow the consensus of critical opinion and thus presume that the theologians at Old Princeton Seminary were scholastic rationalists who were indifferent to the subjective and experiential components of religious epistemology, in fact the Princetonians were committed Augustinians who conceived of reason in a moral rather than a merely rational sense. They recognized, in other words, that the reception of revealed truth is an activity involving the "whole soul" rather than the rational faculty alone, and consequently they insisted, the allegations of Rogers and McKim notwithstanding,⁹³ that the regenerate alone could apprehend this truth in a "right" or saving sense. As Iain Murray has incisively argued,

The *use* of the mind is not "rationalism"; it all depends on whether that use is right or wrong. Rationalism is a use of the mind which trusts in its own ability to arrive at truth about God *without* his aid and *apart* from revelation: it treats the mind as a source of knowledge rather than as a channel. The Enlightenment was a classic demonstration of innate human pride in the exaltation of the human intellect. To equate that spirit with the teaching of the

⁸⁹ Cf. Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 296.

⁹⁰ Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* 85.

⁹¹ Stewart, review of *The Philosophy of Charles Hodge* 65.

⁹² Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* 87 note 226. For Rogers's full discussion of "right reason" and related matters, cf. 82–87, 222–53.

⁹³ Cf. Rogers and McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* 290; Rogers, "Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confession" 154.

Princeton men, who believed that it is the grace of God alone which sets men free to understand, is to stand truth on its head.⁹⁴

The second misunderstanding follows from the first and has to do with the nature of Old Princeton’s opposition to the rise of theological liberalism. While the Princeton theologians certainly were convinced that those who are “taught by God” articulate their thoughts about the things of God in an “orthodox” fashion,⁹⁵ nevertheless their opposition to the rise of theological liberalism was grounded in more than just a stubborn reluctance to allow “more light and truth to break forth from God’s Word” (after all, even B. B. Warfield was a proponent of “progressive orthodoxy”).⁹⁶ The Princetonians were opposed to the rise of theological liberalism, in short, not simply because liberals advanced interpretations of doctrine that differed from their own dogmatic assertions, but more specifically because liberals conceived of doctrines in an “anti-intellectual” or “feminized” sense.⁹⁷ Whereas the Princetonians conceived of doctrines as foundational summaries of biblical truth that must be believed in order for there to be faith, liberals conceived of doctrines as little more than expressions of an ineffable religious experience for a particular time and place. They considered doctrines to be true, in other words, not because they corresponded to real states of affairs in the external world, but rather because they captured the subjective experience of religion in the thought forms of a particular age.⁹⁸

Although this pragmatic conception of truth certainly allowed for a broadening of theological boundaries along intra- and even intertextual lines, it needed to be opposed, the Princetonians reasoned, because it left fallen sinners without access to a source of salvation outside of their own (or their community’s) experience. Indeed, it presumed an experiential orientation

⁹⁴ Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* 197.

⁹⁵ For example, see Charles Hodge, “The Indwelling of the Spirit,” in *Princeton Sermons* 77. Cf. John 6:44–45.

⁹⁶ John Robinson, quoted in Dorrien, *Remaking of Evangelical Theology* 11. Theologians like Roger Olson employ this phrase to help them distinguish between evangelicals who are “reformists” and evangelicals who are “traditionalists.” Whereas “reformists” are open to “new light,” “traditionalists,” apparently, are “unwilling” to modify their positions (“The Future of Evangelical Theology” 42, 47). While this rather strained distinction certainly packs a rhetorical punch, it is grossly unfair to both past and present members of the “traditionalist” camp. Warfield, for example, believed in “progressive orthodoxy” (cf. Robert Swanton, “Warfield and Progressive Orthodoxy,” *Reformed Theological Review* 23 [October 1964] 76–77), and today evangelicals like Ardel B. Caneday and Thomas R. Schreiner are challenging accepted understandings of perseverance and assurance in a constructive rather than a destructive fashion (cf. *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001]). This suggests, among other things, that the categories of commentators like Olson have become sufficiently hardened to warrant immediate revision. For an interesting discussion of “hardening of the categories,” which apparently is an affliction that cripples even the most irenic of evangelicals, see Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* 554–69.

⁹⁷ Cf. Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962, 1963) 55–141; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: The Noonday, 1998; 1977) 3–13, 17–43, 121–64.

⁹⁸ See, for example, Shailer Mathews, *The Faith of Modernism* (New York: Macmillan, 1924) 100, 115, 119, 148, 174–75, and *New Faith for Old* (New York: Macmillan, 1936) 225, 233, 237.

that emptied the Christian religion of enduring cognitive substance, and as a consequence engendered a progressive inclination that confounded the stating of Christian belief “in terms of modern thought” with the stating of modern thought “in terms of Christian belief.”⁹⁹ While the denominational heirs of classical theological liberalism have milked this progressive tendency for practically all it is worth,¹⁰⁰ it is, unfortunately, enjoying something of a renaissance in certain quarters of the evangelical camp, albeit in a strangely nuanced form. That this is the case, and that a new kind of fundamentalism is rising within the ranks of those who are searching for a “generous orthodoxy” with a large, forgiving center,¹⁰¹ is manifest in the baldly imperialistic tendencies of progressive evangelicals like Robert Webber.

III. PARADIGM THINKING AND THE POSTCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL

1. *The postconservative project.* According to Robert Webber, former professor of Theology at Wheaton College and a prominent leader in the postconservative evangelical movement, the thinking of the evangelical community has been shaped by the “paradigm” of the modern era for too long, and thus it is high time for evangelicals to “rethink” the faith for a postmodern age. His recent offering, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*, is intended for precisely this purpose. Evangelicals will liberate themselves from their bondage to the rationalistic assumptions of Enlightenment thought and faithfully “re-present” the faith in our postmodern world, he suggests, neither by “preserving the Christian faith in its modern form,” nor by running “headlong into the sweeping changes that accommodate Christianity to postmodern forms.”¹⁰² They will “re-present” the faith “in a fresh way,” rather, by recovering the insights of an age very similar to our own, namely that of classical Christianity (AD 100–600).¹⁰³ “The fundamental concern of this book,” Webber writes,

... is to find points of contact between classical Christianity and postmodern thought. Classical Christianity was shaped in a pagan and relativistic society much like our own. Classical Christianity was not an accommodation to paganism but an alternative practice of life. Christians in a postmodern world

⁹⁹ B. B. Warfield, review of *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought*, by Seven Oxford Men, in *Critical Reviews*, vol. 10, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (1932; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 322. On the definite meaning of the word “Christianity,” cf. B. B. Warfield, “Redeemer and Redemption,” in *Biblical Doctrines*, vol. 2, *The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield* (1929; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 396.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Jones, *Spirit Wars*.

¹⁰¹ For example, see Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 325–51; Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology” 42.

¹⁰² Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 14.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 16.

will succeed, not by watering down the faith, but by being a countercultural community that invites people to be shaped by the story of Israel and Jesus.¹⁰⁴

At first glance, the basic thrust of Webber’s proposal will undoubtedly resonate with thoughtful members of the “evangelical establishment.” After all, both Luther and Calvin were indebted to the insights of classical Christianity, and even B. B. Warfield, “the lion of Princeton,”¹⁰⁵ insisted that Christians must state their beliefs in terms of the thought of the age in which they live.¹⁰⁶ More critical readers will quickly recognize, however, that Webber’s approach to the Christian faith is altogether different from “the Book-oriented approach” of Luther, Calvin, and Warfield.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, whereas evangelicals like Warfield emphasize “the foundational nature of Scripture” and consequently acknowledge that the Christian faith can be “rationally explained and defended,” Webber insists that the authoritative nexus of both faith and truth is found in an inherently mysterious, “event-oriented perception of the world” that is handed down from age to age in “the community of God’s presence,” the church.¹⁰⁸ As such, Webber argues that the responsibility of the church in the postmodern world is not to recover an articulation of this perception that was “incarnated” in an earlier age.¹⁰⁹ It is, rather, to “construct a theology that will be consistent with historic Christianity yet relevant to our new time in culture.”¹¹⁰ What is needed, he contends, is a faithful application of the essence of the Christian faith “to a postmodern worldview.”¹¹¹

2. *Paradigm thinking and the continuity of the Christian tradition.* At the heart of Webber’s attempt “to interface historic Christian truths into the dawning of a new era” is his insistence that evangelicals will “face the changing cultural situation with integrity” only if they allow themselves to think paradigmatically.¹¹² According to Webber, there have been six discernible “paradigms of time” throughout the history of the church in which believers have struggled to articulate the essence of the faith in response to the prevailing cultural circumstances of the day.¹¹³ While the circumstances have changed from age to age and the “incarnations” of the faith have thus varied according to “the specific cultural context in which [they

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 7.

¹⁰⁵ According to Kim Riddlebarger (“The Lion of Princeton: Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield on Apologetics, Theological Method and Polemics” [Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997] v), this is the title given to Warfield by George Marsden.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Warfield, review of *Foundations* 320–34. “No one will doubt,” he argued, “that Christians of to-day must state their Christian beliefs in terms of modern thought. Every age has a language of its own and can speak no other. Mischief comes only when, instead of stating Christian belief in terms of modern thought, an effort is made, rather, to state modern thought in terms of Christian belief” (p. 322).

¹⁰⁷ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 45.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 45, 18, 78, 46.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 17.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 20–21.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 12.

¹¹² Ibid. 14, 17.

¹¹³ Ibid. 13.

were] expressed (e.g., medieval Roman versus sixteenth-century Reformation),” what has remained constant throughout the ages, Webber contends, is a “transcultural framework of faith . . . that has been blessed by socio-cultural particularity in every period of church history.”¹¹⁴ Since the “multiplicities of faith expressions” reflect merely the “attempts within a particular cultural moment and geographical place to express the faith in a fresh way,” those who would “incarnate the historic faith in the emerging culture” will do so only by recovering “the framework of faith that is common to the diversity.”¹¹⁵ It follows, therefore, that if we would faithfully “represent” the faith in the postmodern context we must not “root” or “freeze” our understanding of the faith in a particular articulation of the faith from the past (like that of the Reformation, for example).¹¹⁶ Rather, we must “affirm the whole church in all its previous manifestations” by retrieving

. . . the universally accepted framework of faith that originated with the apostles, was developed by the Fathers, and has been handed down by the church in its liturgical and theological traditions. . . . Our calling is not to reinvent the Christian faith, but, in keeping with the past, to carry forward what the church has affirmed from its beginning. We change . . . “not to be different, but to remain the same.”¹¹⁷

While there is little doubt that more conservative readers will be intrigued by Webber’s call for theological reconstruction, they likely will wonder if the call sounds plausible only because religious language has been emptied of real significance. After all, they might ask, is it not possible that one theological formulation differs from another because the framers of the two formulations were actually talking about different religious realities? In other words, if words mean things, and if we all hold to the truthfulness of the “incarnation” we affirm, then can it really be true that “while we are all Christians, some of us are Roman Catholic Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Reformation Christians, twentieth-century evangelical Christians, or some other form of modern or postmodern Christians?”¹¹⁸

It can and indeed must be true, Webber assures us, if all genuine expressions of the faith in fact share a common core. What, then, might this unifying core be? The answer is found in the assumptions that inform “the hermeneutic of paradigm thinking.”¹¹⁹ In the first place, Webber insists that religious truth is found in subjective encounter with the classical origins of the Christian tradition. Following the postmodern theorist Hans-Georg Gadamer, Webber argues that it is possible for one paradigm of history to speak to another, because it is possible for an individual living in one historical “horizon” to “fuse” with the “horizon” that is the source of the tradition.¹²⁰ In Webber’s thinking, this “fusion” takes place in the life and

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 17.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 16, 17.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 16.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 16, 17.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 16.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 24, 29. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1995).

worship of the church, the “body of Christ” that is the living sign of *Christus Victor*, “the community of people where the victory of Christ over evil becomes present in and to this world.”¹²¹

In the second place, Webber contends that a “fusion of horizons” is possible in the community of faith because the truth-value of the religious utterances that sustain the community—be they the propositions of Scripture or historic confessions—is not found in the words themselves but in the religious function those words perform. Following the “cultural-linguistic” approach of postliberal theologian George Lindbeck, Webber insists that the truth-value of religious utterances is “intratextual” rather than “extratextual.”¹²² That is to say, religious utterances are true because they form a perspective on life that is consistent with the perspective of a particular tradition, not because they correspond to “extratextual” reality as such.¹²³ Since the perception of the world that is characteristic of the Christian tradition was articulated by the apostles and summarized by the early church in the “rule of faith” (the classical summary of the apostolic interpretation of the Christ event that is embodied in the ecumenical creeds), it follows that the religious utterances of Christians from various “frame[s] of reference” are true to the extent that they form a “framework of thought” that is shaped by the central component of that “rule,” namely the cosmic reality of *Christus Victor*.¹²⁴ The theme of *Christus Victor*, Webber insists, is “central to the classical Christian vision of reality. It does not stand alone, but is connected to all other aspects of the Christian faith as the central thread to the entire tapestry.”¹²⁵

When we consider Webber’s call for unity within diversity in light of these hermeneutical assumptions, the justification for his reluctance to make one expression of the faith the “standard” by which all other expressions are measured suddenly comes into clearer focus.¹²⁶ The church is the community of faith in which the perception of the world that is grounded in the reality of *Christus Victor* and summarized in the “rule of faith” is “handed over” from one generation of believers to another in the life and worship of the body, the “fellowship in faith.”¹²⁷ The task of the church in each successive age and in every sociocultural context, then, is not to explain and defend a specific incarnation of the faith (for the essence of faith is found in a perspective on life rather than in submission to propositions

¹²¹ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 81, 77.

¹²² *Ibid.* 30, 185. Cf. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

¹²³ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 30, 46, 182–85. According to William Placher, “A good Lindbeckian, postliberal theologian will . . . operate less like a philosophically oriented apologist and more like a sensitive anthropologist, who tries to describe the language and practice of a tribe in terms of how they function in the life of that community and how they shape the way that community sees the world, rather than trying to defend these people’s way of talking by the standards of some universal rationality or experience” (*Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989] 163).

¹²⁴ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 180–86, 196.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* 31.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* 16.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 180–83, 79.

that correspond to objective reality as such). It is, rather, first to express the faith “within the context of history and culture” through “the critical use of human methods of thought,” and then to beckon “seekers” into the ongoing fellowship of the community, so that their perspective on life can be shaped by that which is shared by all genuine expressions of the faith, namely the perception of the world that is embodied in the Word, liturgy, and symbolism of the “people of the Event.”¹²⁸ “The goal of the church,” Webber contends,

is to be a divine standard, a sign of God’s incarnational presence and activity in history. In a postmodern world the most effective witness to a world of disconnected people is the church that forms community and embodies the reality of the new society. People in a postmodern world are not persuaded to faith by reason as much as they are moved to faith by participation in God’s earthly community.¹²⁹

3. *Say what? The imperialistic nature of neo-fundamentalism.* No matter what one’s initial reaction to Webber’s proposal might be, even the harshest critic must concede that the typical author would kill for the kinds of reviews *Ancient-Future Faith* has received. Clark Pinnock, for example, not only suggests that *Ancient-Future Faith* presents a faith that has “the power to speak to the postmodern world,” but more significantly praises Webber in much the same way that editors of major newspapers praise notoriously independent politicians for voting in the “correct” fashion on conspicuous social issues.¹³⁰ Just as editors cite those votes as evidence that the politician in question has “grown” while in office, so too Pinnock cites *Ancient-Future Faith* as evidence of “Webber’s own experience of growth as a hearer of God’s Word.”¹³¹

Most conservative readers will likely wonder, however, just what exactly it is that Webber has been hearing, for his proposal is marred by an ambivalence that undermines his attempt to move the evangelical camp out of the modern era and into the postmodern paradigm, an ambivalence that I would suggest is characteristic of the postconservative project. While Webber incisively critiques the deleterious influence that modern thought has had and continues to have on certain habits of the evangelical mind, his own proposal is nonetheless profoundly modern in three distinct yet interrelated senses. In the first place, it presumes that Christianity is, as J. Gresham Machen used to say when critiquing theological liberalism, “a life, not a doctrine.”¹³² Christians do not draw people into the kingdom of God by proclaiming propositions that articulate the objective foundations of the Christian life; rather they draw people into the corporate experience of the “fellowship in faith,” and it is this experience that then moves seekers to

¹²⁸ Ibid. 196, 163; Webber, “Out with the Old” 17.

¹²⁹ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 72, 79.

¹³⁰ Ibid. back cover.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 19.

embrace the “framework of faith” in some mysterious fashion.¹³³ As Machen made clear in his classic work *Christianity and Liberalism*, such an approach not only has it backwards, but more importantly it can survive only because advocates tragically presume that fallen sinners need an ineffable experience rather than a gospel that is proclaimed objectively.

If Webber’s proposal is profoundly modern in one sense because it confounds the relationship between life and doctrine, it is so in another because it presumes that the *sine qua non* of the Christian religion is subjective rather than objective. This presumption, which is grounded in the modern era’s relocation of the divine-human nexus, is perhaps nowhere more clearly manifest than in the epistemology that informs Webber’s functional understanding of doctrine.¹³⁴ “Information,” he contends, “is no longer something that can be objectively known and verified through evidence and logic. Knowledge is more subjective and experiential. Knowledge comes through participation in a community and in an immersion with the symbols and the meaning of the community.”¹³⁵ When the relationship between life and doctrine is considered in light of this decidedly anti-intellectual understanding of religious epistemology, it becomes immediately clear that religious life precedes doctrine in Webber’s thinking, not because there is something substandard about doctrine itself, but rather because doctrines *qua* doctrines must be kept in their proper place. Doctrines are not important because they carry the “cognitive and informational meaningfulness” that must be appropriated in order for there to be faith.¹³⁶ Rather, they are the expressions of faith that sustain the religious life of the community and mediate the “framework of faith” to those who are drawn into the corporate experience of the “fellowship in faith.” As such, doctrines are of secondary—not

¹³³ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 77–83.

¹³⁴ I recognize that Webber would reject the notion that his subjectivism is grounded in the modern era’s “retreat from the intellect into the heart” (cf. *ibid.* 121–25). It is not entirely clear how he can avoid this charge, however, given his emphasis on the functional rather than the propositional significance of religious utterances in the corporate experience of the Christian community.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 101. In personal correspondence, Stanley Grenz suggests that it is inappropriate for me to argue that postconservatives like Webber are subjectivists. I am misrepresenting theologians like Webber, he insists, because I am “reading these folks through Enlightenment lenses” (Grenz to Helseth, November 21, 2001). While I do affirm with Stephen J. Nichols that “By basing truth in the interpretive community of the church and rejecting truth as grounded upon objectivity, one is left with a subjective faith and a subjective apologetic” (“Contemporary Apologetics and the Nature of Truth,” paper presented at the 50th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Orlando, FL, November 1998, 7), I have yet to be convinced that being critical of those who engage in an extended polemic against the concept of objective truth is necessarily evidence of indebtedness to Enlightenment categories of thought. Again, Nichols makes the crucial point. “While it is true that objectivity is a crucial part of the enlightenment, it is not true that the enlightenment is a crucial part of objectivity. In the enlightenment project, objectivity was predicated upon the autonomy of the individual. If, however, objectivity is predicated upon something different, can one affirm objectivity?” (*ibid.* 6). With Nichols and the Princetonians I would argue that one can and indeed one must, since it is the objective content of faith that saves, not faith as a merely subjective phenomenon.

¹³⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* 16, quoted in Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 19.

primary—significance, because they simply express the “framework of faith” for a particular time and place.

Finally, Webber’s proposal is profoundly modern because his functional understanding of truth reduces to pragmatism. Not only does he insist that Scripture must be read “theologically” rather than propositionally—that is, we read the text not to discover the foundational meaning of the text but to ask how “this book, this passage, this verse has been used in the history of the church” to form the life of the people of God—but he also contends that doctrines are true to the extent that they form a “framework of thought” that is consistent with the perspective of the Christian tradition.¹³⁷ The truth-value of the Nicene Creed, for example, “is not to be found in words that correspond with an exact reality, but in words that truthfully signify the religious reality of the Trinity in the system of thought (in this case, Hellenistic) in which it is articulated.”¹³⁸ But as F. LeRon Shults has incisively argued, although the Nicene divines certainly developed doctrines in order to shape the life of the Christian community, they did so “because of certain things they thought were ontologically true.”¹³⁹ Surely, to miss this point is to gut the creed of its truth content, to consign the believer to “a theological *cul-de-sac* of the worst kind, mired in the circular reasoning of fideism,”¹⁴⁰ and to raise the specter of religious imperialism. In an age when all truth claims are reduced to the level of subjective preference, any claim to universal truthfulness that is not grounded in a real state of affairs in the external world will smack of precisely that kind of religious chauvinism that committed postmodernists rightly despise. While Webber repeatedly asserts that the Christian narrative is universally true, he fails to recognize that such an assertion simply cannot stand if it is made on purely intratextual grounds.¹⁴¹ It is herein, then, that is, in the inherently imperialistic nature of truth claims that are grounded in little more than the experiential “ethos” of the believing community, that the fundamentalism of progressive evangelicalism is to be found.

IV. CONCLUSION

I have argued in this essay that despite what the consensus of critical opinion would have us believe, the Princeton theologians ought not to be regarded as scholastic rationalists, because they conceived of reason in a

¹³⁷ Ibid. 19–20, 30, 189–90. Webber’s understanding of the authority of Scripture is difficult to assess. He insists that the text is inspired; yet he rejects *sola Scriptura*. He is less than enthused about the doctrine of inerrancy because he rejects “the notion of propositional truth.” And he is convinced that “in the modern era biblical criticism has eroded the authority of Scripture.” Such commitments, it seems, are difficult to square with what evangelicals have historically believed about Scripture. For a concise statement of how he uses the Bible in doing theology, see Robert E. Webber, “An Evangelical and Catholic Methodology,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (ed. Robert K. Johnston; Atlanta: John Knox, 1985) 150–58.

¹³⁸ Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 30.

¹³⁹ Shults, “Truth Happens?” 35.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 36.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* 93–115.

moral rather than a merely rational sense. They recognized, in other words, that cognition involves the “whole soul” rather than the rational faculty alone, and consequently insisted that the regenerate alone could apprehend revealed truth in a “right” or saving sense. I have also suggested that since postconservatism’s repudiation of Old Princeton’s “propositionalist understanding of the theological enterprise” presumes the consensus of critical opinion, this repudiation, in short, is based upon a caricature of Old Princeton rather than the views of the Princetonians themselves. This is unfortunate, not simply because it severs postconservative evangelicals from the epistemological capital of Old Princeton’s emphasis upon the unity of head and heart, but more significantly because it leaves them without the epistemological wherewithal to claim that the Christian worldview is universally true. Without the willingness to affirm that the regenerate are “taught by God,” and without the eagerness to acknowledge that this teaching has reference to something more than merely subjective states of affairs, all claims to universal truthfulness—even those articulated by the most irenic among us—necessarily clank with the bigoted ring “of triumphalism, elitism, and separatism, which is the hallmark of fundamentalism.”¹⁴²

This, then, is what I take to be one of the more significant obstacles to the viability of postconservative evangelicalism’s “narrativist-communitarian model” of theology. While postconservative evangelicals are convinced that the heart of Christian faith is found in an “identity-producing” experience that is mediated through an “identity-constituting narrative,” they nonetheless acknowledge that different kinds of religious experiences are facilitated by different kinds of “interpretive frameworks.”¹⁴³ But if all that sets one religious experience apart from another is the “interpretive framework” that facilitates the experience, on what basis can Christians claim that their experience is truer than another? Postconservatives might suggest that the universal truthfulness of the Christian narrative is ultimately found in “the explicative power of the Christian faith,” and in “the value of the Christian worldview for illuminating human experience, as well as our human understanding of our world.”¹⁴⁴ Yet how can such claims be anything more than baldly chauvinistic when they are grounded in propositions that themselves can only be subjectively true? Although Grenz and Webber and their postconservative colleagues might imagine that the “explicative power” of the Christian faith surpasses that of other religious traditions, thinkers from other religious traditions—who are similarly convinced of the “explicative power” of their own worldviews—will certainly want to know

¹⁴² Olson, “The Future of Evangelical Theology” 47. According to Stephen Nichols, “by rejecting the possibility of asserting objective truth, one necessarily comments against the objective reality of the historical event that forms the basis of the faith and against the objective truths recorded about that event. The result of rejecting objective truth is that one cannot escape subjectivity in apologetics. In an increasingly pluralistic society, evangelicalism has no right to assert claims to exclusivity given this framework, and such may not be the healthiest for evangelical apologetics in any case” (“Contemporary Apologetics and the Nature of Truth” 6).

¹⁴³ Grenz, *Renewing the Center* 202–3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 205.

who died and left them in charge. A number of years ago, Millard Erickson zeroed in on this problem with characteristic clarity, and it is with his evaluation that I conclude this essay.

We now are aware of the claims of other religions, whose adherents are to be found even within what have previously been primarily Christian cultures. Many of them have the same sort of subjective certitude about the validity of their faith as do Christians. If indeed postconservative evangelicals hold that Christianity is the true religion, they must make some note of this phenomenon and offer a further reason for their conclusion. If not, this either looks like ethnocentrism or at least ignorance of the postmodern scene.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 84. I would like to thank Ardel Caneday, Brett Watson, Justin Taylor, and Stanley Grenz for their helpful comments on significant portions of this essay.