

much chest thumping or like some distant rustling of leaves. For such people to be drawn into the church's metanarrative and moved to reimagine the world theologically, perhaps the only hope is that God will call another Francis, another Teresa — men and women who will naively read the Gospel stories and imitate their subject.

Reading the Scriptures Faithfully in a Postmodern Age

William Stacy Johnson

The Scriptures are our guide, and we, their apprentices. This conviction ought readily to be embraced by all Christians. It is a general and formal claim about the Bible's role as central to the church's canon.¹ What to make of the Scriptures materially, however, engenders more controversy. It is a question that requires continual investigation. Today, in reaction to the widespread loss of biblical meaning, many are advocating a return to understanding the material content of the Bible as a unified narrative.² We may think of the Scriptures as telling a coherent story of God — "the God of Israel who called a people out of bondage, gave them the Torah, . . . raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead, [and] is still at work in the world today." Scripture "tells the story of God's action of creating, judging, and saving the world."³ This understanding of the Bible as a unified narrative is the focus of many of the essays in this volume.

At the same time, there is no such thing as a "narrative" — whether unified or otherwise — apart from the contingent theological wisdom of those

1. By "canon" I mean the organizing framework of the church's life that includes, in addition to the Bible, the normative creeds, liturgies, practices, and offices that are constitutive of what the church is. See William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

2. For a forceful statement of this claim, see Robert W. Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," in this volume. Although I am in sympathy with Jenson's claim, the truth about biblical narrative is a bit more complex and in need of nuance. See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties," in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 236-48.

3. See Thesis 1, "Nine Theses on the Interpretation of Scripture."

who are doing the narrating. The narrative is not just a given but must be constructed and reconstructed in the life of the community of faith over time. In addition, the biblical narrative must be supplemented and interrogated by the biblical genre of wisdom;⁴ the reflections of the wisdom literature of Scripture challenge the all-inclusiveness and tendencies to triumphalism of narrative.⁵

Today in the community of faith, we undertake the constructive and reconstructive reading of the Scriptures in what many are calling a postmodern time. It is a time in which both modern and premodern ways of thinking — particularly, certain modern and premodern versions of what is real, meaningful, and true — have been called radically into question. By questioning traditional notions of objective truth, pointing out the fallibility and contextual limits of all our knowing, and seeking to move beyond self-evident “foundations” for belief, postmodernity has prompted us to rethink the very meaning of meaning itself.⁶

While this rethinking has often seemed hostile to religious faith, I want to identify a threefold movement within postmodern thought that may well provide Christian theology a strategic opportunity to understand its own subject matter — the gospel of Jesus Christ — in a fresh way. We may think of this as a movement beyond foundations, beyond totality, and toward the Other.

I. Beyond Foundations

For some time now, a consensus has been developing that the modern objectivist attempt to base all our ideas, institutions, and initiatives upon universal all-encompassing, self-evident, and self-legitimizing foundations is self-defeating.⁷ The reason is that we have no ready access to these supposedly self-evident foundations — not, at least, apart from a tradition of reflection and criticism that helps legitimate all that we take to be foundational in the first place. Our knowing is built up not so much from discrete and fixed foundations as from a web of interdependent and self-correcting beliefs. To conceive rationality as relying upon foundations that are “self-evident” is to ignore the contingent and situated character of all our knowing.

4. Ricoeur, “Biblical Time,” in *Figuring the Sacred*, pp. 167–80.

5. Mark I. Wallace, introduction to *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 27.

6. For a brief introduction to postmodernity, see Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*, GTI (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

7. For a summary of the literature on this subject, see John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*, GTI (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

The movement beyond foundations, then, reflects a transformation in the status of knowledge. Throughout much of the modern period, Western views of rationality have oscillated between such self-defeating and opposing dualities as absolutism versus skepticism, realism versus idealism, emphasis on the subject versus fixation on the object, and so forth. In response to this, Richard J. Bernstein has helpfully characterized the emerging postmodern rationality as a movement “beyond objectivism and relativism.”⁸ On the one hand, objectivism is the view that insists on “some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness, or rightness.”⁹ Objectivism is usually tied to classical foundationalism, namely, the attempt to secure our lives through the assertion of certain self-evident, incorrigible, and universal truths upon which the edifice of knowledge must be erected. On the other hand, there is relativism, with its denial that there is any access to an objective truth as universally grounded. Apart from the language and culture in which a claim to truth is immersed, says relativism, speaking about “truth” would have no meaning for us. We have no access to truth apart from our own situatedness.

Bernstein has argued, persuasively I think, that a new postmodern form of rationality is emerging, one in which the warfare between objectivism and relativism is unmasked as posing a false dichotomy. On the one hand, this new rationality is historically situated, hermeneutically aware, and rooted in tradition, as relativism insists; on the other hand, it does not believe that we are left with nothing more than an incessant conflict of traditions. The boundaries that separate different traditions are not absolute and incommensurate, which means that there is still the possibility of making common cause in knowing and choosing to do what is right, in seeking justice, and in holding ourselves and others morally accountable. Moving beyond objectivism need not entail the embrace of the sort of relativism that leads us to despair. For as H. Richard Niebuhr put it in his classic book *The Meaning*

8. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). Note that Bernstein sharpens this dichotomy by describing it as one between a fallibilistic form of objectivism and a nonsubjective form of relativism. A fallibilistic objectivism is different from a now obsolete absolutism that presumes to have arrived at a truth that is immune from criticism. Similarly, the forms of relativism advanced today are not subjectivist, since they do not necessarily situate the origin of knowledge in the knowing subject. All that is necessary to be a relativist, in Bernstein's sense, is a denial of overarching frameworks of meaning and the belief that all knowledge is situated in particularistic conceptual schemes.

9. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, p. 8.

of *Revelation*, the recognition of the fallibility that attends the way we see need not lead us to doubt the reality of *what* we see.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this new mode of postmodern rationality is frightening to some Christians. They find it frightening because they have completely succumbed to a one-sided objectivism out of a deep-seated fear of the dangers of relativism. Without an objective and infallible source of meaning, so their reasoning goes, the truth claims of the gospel seem to be undermined. Hence, their response is to ground Christian belief in an infallible text, an infallible experience, or an infallible magisterium.

It is time that we recognized this foundationalist way of thinking for what it is. In its Christian guise, it represents not the strength of faith but the result of a faith that has lost its nerve. The Christian Scriptures set themselves up not so much as truth claims to be defended by philosophical foundations but as witnesses to the transforming power that no truth claim itself can contain. The gospel is not a "foundation" to render our traditional notions of rationality secure but a remaking of everything, including rationality itself.

As a response to the movement beyond foundations, some contemporary theologians have emphasized the need to return to biblical narrative, understanding the church's theological task as an exercise in conceptual redescription of that narrative. For example, Hans Frei advised theologians to consider the conceptual world of the Bible as though it were a thoroughly realistic narrative that "means what it says." Building on aspects of the later work of Karl Barth, Frei spoke of "a sort of *literary* or conceptual-analytical reading of the biblical text rather than either a *historical* or religious-experiential one."¹¹ In this view, the literary "what" of Christianity takes priority over the experiential "how."¹² Theology becomes a self-descriptive rendering of the biblical story designed to lead modern readers back into a world long forgotten. It accomplishes this feat by appealing only to criteria that are already embedded within the Christian faith itself.

Christian theology, on Frei's reading, is a species of what philosophers

10. "It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history." H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 18-19. (In the 1967 Collier-Macmillan paperback edition, the citation is to p. 13.)

11. Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 81.

12. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, p. 43.

today would call holistic justification.¹³ Justifying Christian belief, to use Charles Sanders Peirce's metaphor, proceeds less like a single chain of argument and more like a strong cable composed of numerous fibers. Its persuasiveness rests in the totality of the fibers taken together rather than in the co-gency of any single strand.¹⁴ Moreover, because the criteria for theology are said to be internal, resting solely within the network of beliefs distinctive to Christianity, Frei's form of Barthian theology has little use for apologetic extrabiblical appeals to make its case, except on what might be called an *ad hoc* basis.¹⁵ And it purportedly makes no appeals to any "foundations" for knowing, at least not to any such foundations existing outside the language and commitments of the Christian community.¹⁶

This contemporary narrative approach to biblical religion resonates with the historic Christian reliance upon the rule of faith, or *regula fidei*. Formally, the rule of faith is an affirmation that the faith of the church is the same yesterday, today, and always. Materially, the rule of faith consists in the various creedal summaries and confessional statements that have guided the church in its theological reflection through the centuries.

There is much to be said for recovering the guidance of the rule of faith in the life of the church. Yet this recovery is not just a descriptive endeavor, as Frei and his colleagues insist; it is a constructive theological task. To say that theology is constructive is not to claim that it is just making things up as it goes along. It does mean that it cannot be based on self-evident foundations. Theology responds to revelation, but in so doing, it recognizes that at every turn it proceeds from fallible human constructs and undertakes always to "begin again at the beginning," as Barth put it, under the demands of the contemporary situation. It always acknowledges that truth — above all, the truth of revelation — is not simply a given but a goal. Identifying the truth is an open-ended task at which we must constantly work along the way.

The movement beyond foundations is important not just to our interpretation of the Scriptures but also to our understanding of that to which they bear witness. Neither the Scriptures nor the God to whom they bear witness — in their varying and sometimes conflicting ways — can be reduced to a manip-

13. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, chs. 3 and 4; app. C.

14. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 5:157.

15. See Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ch. 6; William Werpehowski, "Ad Hoc Apologetics," *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986): 282-301.

16. The most sophisticated extension of Frei's argument about holistic narrative into constructive theology is that of Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

ulable "foundation." Theology's substantive task today is to gauge the demise of certain classical (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus) and modern (e.g., Descartes, Kant, Hegel) portraits of God that — despite their many differences — had a common tendency to reduce God to an accessible basis on which our world was thought to rest. Theology, in both its classical and modern forms, has had a difficult time freeing itself from pagan antiquity's assumption that divinity is an abstract asēty, a fixed *archē*, or beginning, whose essence is to remain forever as it was in the beginning.¹⁷ Eberhard Jüngel has called this the metaphysical concept of God, or the God of theism.¹⁸ Martin Heidegger termed it the God of "onto-theology."¹⁹ It is the "God" whom we reduce to some sort of "supreme being" — the perfectly timeless, impassible, self-satisfied, self-caused cause upon which the world is thought to rest. Beguiled by this assumption, Western Christian theology has become an inadvertent effort to protect this "God" from the vagaries of finitude and surprise — an effort to free God from any of the attributes or experiences we would ordinarily associate with the ability to have meaningful relationships with others.²⁰ Throughout the career of Western theology, it seems that the God who says, "Behold, I am doing a new thing" has continued to recede from view.

If, on the contrary, we refuse to reduce to a mere foundation for belief the God who is *for* and *with* human beings in Jesus Christ by the Spirit's power, we must take the Bible, and the peculiarities of its form, more seriously. First, we must wrestle with what it means theologically that the truth about God is told in Scripture in the form of a story. It is not enough to point to the biblical narrative and say, in effect, "Look, here is our story; take it or leave it." Rather, a theology that moves beyond foundations must engage a collection of Scriptures that renders a congeries of stories — stories that are not always saying quite the same thing. The testimony of this passage of Scripture is juxtaposed with the "countertestimony" of that passage of Scripture, and so on.²¹ Sometimes the stories are disrupting and strange, portray-

ing God, the main character, in provocative and counterintuitive ways. In addition, the stories are accompanied by other materials that reflect upon them, problematize them, and use them in fascinating and creative ways, as we see, for example, in Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs.²² If the Scriptures do not reduce God to a single perspective, then neither can theology.

Second, seeing beyond the God of simple foundations requires us to come to grips theologically with the fact that something grand and glorious is at stake in these stories. They contain real action, real drama, and real players. Something is at stake in these stories, such that had they gone a different way, the relationship between God and humanity would certainly have been different. What if Moses had renounced his calling? What if Jesus of Nazareth had chosen a different path in the garden of Gethsemane? These questions may seem overly speculative, but they make a difference if the dramatic character of the Bible is taken seriously.²³ Moreover, from the standpoint of Christian faith, it is in the continued telling of these stories that people of faith come to know actually, really, and in ever new ways who God is. That is to say, the stories are not fixed but dynamic, accomplishing new things in new settings. The biblical stories tell us not merely about the *nature* of God in the past; they constantly reveal to us in new ways the *identity* of God in the present. The stories, in other words, are not merely illustrative; they are constitutive of who God is. They mark out the essence of God's very own life, and therefore, when they are read in faith, we see to our amazement that the life of God is still unfolding in humanity's midst.

Nowhere is this more true than in God's identification with the Crucified One, Jesus of Nazareth. By identifying with Jesus of Nazareth, God has determined to bring about something amazing, something that the tradition calls grace, God's self-giving engagement to be *for* and *with* us. By becoming one with humanity in Jesus of Nazareth, God has determined not to be God without us. In other words, there is something real and vital at stake as these stories unfold — something at stake not only for the human beings who play a role in the stories but also for the identity of God.²⁴

22. On the way the Song of Songs reflects on earlier parts of the biblical tradition, see the contrasting hermeneutical proposals of André LaCocque, *Romance, She Wrote: A Hermeneutical Essay on Song of Songs* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1998), and Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2000).

23. The presupposition that something is dramatically at stake for God in the biblical narrative is worked out systematically in Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

24. The theological proposal that best exemplifies this notion, in my view, is Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997-99).

17. William Stacy Johnson, "Barth and Beyond," *Christian Century* 118 (2001): 19.

18. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundations of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 182.

19. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

20. Johnson, "Barth and Beyond," p. 19. Of course, the postmodern interest in rethinking the dynamic relationality of God is not without precedent, as, for example, in the reflections of nineteenth-century idealists such as Fichte and Hegel.

21. While Walter Brueggemann's dichotomy between "testimony" and "countertestimony" is perhaps too simple, it does help point up the polyvalence and ambiguity in the biblical witness. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

Third, we must grapple with what it means theologically that the reality to which these stories bear witness belongs not just to the past but to something that is still unfolding today. The stories of Scripture bear witness to a larger story that is living and not yet finished. Hence, theological interpretation must push beyond viewing the Scriptures as projecting a self-enclosed, already accomplished totality of meaning. What is most important are not the past meanings the stories are thought to contain but the present meanings they continually provoke in the community of faith. At the heart and soul of reading the Scriptures faithfully is the constant rehearsing of stories — and also of sayings, commandments, prophecies, and other materials — whose repetition helps kindle and inflame, right here, at this very moment, the “new thing” that the God who is for us in Jesus Christ is calling into being.

II. Beyond Totality

Biblical faithfulness is more than just nailing down the meaning of a text. It is putting oneself in a position — by engaging the text — to recognize what God has done in the past as well as to discern what God is making possible for, and requiring of, us in the present. To that extent, we read the Scriptures not only with a rule of faith but also with a rule of hope. We read with a perspective that hopes, in relationship to the text, to see beyond the limitations and even the evils that may have been lurking in our previous takes on the whole. This leads to a second postmodern movement that may help us in discerning the revelatory dimensions of the Scriptures: the movement beyond totality.

One of the features of postmodern literary theory that may better enable us to imagine this movement beyond totality and, in particular, to appreciate the open-endedness of the Scriptures — their diverse meanings and the way they provoke new meaning and new responses over time — is the controversial approach to texts called deconstruction. If postmodern theology is constructive in that it cannot be based on self-evident foundations, it is also deconstructive in that it recognizes the complex and multivalent way in which the structures of theological meaning are conveyed. To “deconstruct,” or “deconstrue,” is simply to look at the component parts of a structure. If all meaning is at some level constructive in character, then it is also capable of being deconstructed.

“Deconstruction” is one of those buzzwords on the American scene that has been sometimes misused and often misunderstood, mostly because of misreadings or failures to read carefully the writings of Jacques Derrida, the

one who first wrote about deconstruction, in 1967.²⁵ The deconstruction spoken of by Derrida — despite his often strange and recondite prose — does not maintain, as is often claimed, that texts can mean just anything.²⁶ Rather, it is a way of seeing how every text, by its very nature of being a text, provokes multiple possibilities of meaning. It is not that deconstruction wants to destroy meaning; instead, deconstruction works as a systematic resistance to arriving at a single totality of meaning. It looks to investigate and uncover the complexity of meaning in the intricacies of its component parts, including the conflicts and tensions to which all meaning inevitably gives rise. Above all, at least in Derrida's later writings, it is a way of reading texts, and especially religious texts, with an eye toward what leaving them open-ended might prompt us to do.²⁷

Deconstruction arose in part as a reaction to, but also as a continuation of, certain insights of the approach to literary theory called structuralism.²⁸ The focus on textual structure showed how the organic relationship between language and its referent is a matter of humanly made convention rather than a mirror of what is supposed to be true for all time.²⁹ Language does not partake of some permanent, eternal realm that is lying out there waiting to be retrieved but is itself a complex reality that is rooted in difference, that is, in a set of relationships. Individual parts of language have no intrinsic meaning in isolation from other parts. Structuralism, through its radical relativizing of the subject, or self, opposed philosophies of consciousness, such as phenomenology, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. The consequence was to relativize the vantage point of the author and focus on the structure of the

25. See Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), *ET Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), *ET Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974; corrected edition, 1997); *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris: PUF, 1967), *ET Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

26. See Jacques Derrida, “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 111–54.

27. For the best introduction to the later writings of Derrida from a religious point of view, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

28. For a concise introduction, see Terrence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977).

29. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (1915), ed. Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Pavot, 1973), *ET Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983; LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986).

text or other object under investigation. "The death of the author," or the rejection of what is sometimes called the intentional fallacy, has become a main plank in postmodern interpretation. The meaning of texts is not tied to the original intention of an author, for such a thing is no longer available to us. Once in written form, texts take on a life of their own.

Building on — but also moving beyond — the insights of structuralism, Derrida's deconstruction tried to show that the textual "whole" is not without the tensions and contradictions that are built into the way all meaning is structured. The Western way of thinking operates with a foundational *archê* and *telos* that grounds a sense of meaning that seeks to be univocal. This is evidenced in the way it makes use of polar terms (presence/absence, nature/culture, literal/figural, speech/writing) and transmutes them into binary oppositions, giving one side of the hierarchy a place of privilege to the detriment of the other.

According to Derrida, all this stems from a deep-seated Western longing after pure presence. His point is not, as some claim, to deny the reality of presence or to destroy the cogency of meaning. Nor is it simply to invert the binary oppositions so that, for example, he can create a reverse hierarchy, elevating writing over speech or absence over presence. His aim, rather, is to show how meaning is constituted by difference, one meaning pitted against another. Derrida gives "difference" itself a twofold meaning that encompasses the notions of differing and deferring.³⁰ Meaning depends on difference, but it also functions according to what in theological terms we would call an eschatology. The final meaning — if there is such a thing — is continually deferred.

Some are inclined to dismiss the deconstructive reading of religious texts as simply irreverent or, worse, nihilistic. Perhaps in the hands of some practitioners of deconstruction, it is exactly that. Yet the deconstruction of textual meaning can also serve the religious conviction that there is something elusive and holy in life that can be neither manipulated nor controlled. Deconstructive readings harbor the suspicion that the aim of much modernist interpretation has been actually to do away with the ongoing labor of reading. That is to say, on modernist grounds, once we arrive at an authoritative interpretation, we can file the text away and move on to something else.

This tendency has certainly been evident in modes of modern biblical exegesis. Modern biblical exegesis, in keeping with modern rationality itself, has tended to see Scripture as an object with a single, objectively determined

meaning. It need not detract from the tremendous light modern critical exegesis has shed on what is going on in the texts of Scripture to challenge this same exegesis for the way it reduces the biblical text to a "thing," or object, to be interpreted. The innovations in understanding provided by text criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, and so forth notwithstanding (including the awareness they have brought of complex layers of linguistic, historical, and intertextual meaning), the ultimate point of these modern critical investigations has been to probe the text for a singular, determinate meaning. Under this reductionistic way of thinking, once the singular meaning of Scripture has been discovered, there is really nothing more to be learned. It matters little from a methodological point of view whether the one who is reading the text is a believer or unbeliever — the same meaning is there to be had by all, at least by all who have acquired the tools of historical investigation. Primacy is placed on the critical imagination, the function of which is to understand and explain — and the net effect of which is to treat revelation as something to be first explicated and then applied.

This approach trades on what is often referred to as the container theory of meaning. It assumes that meaning is a property the text possesses. This assumption depends, moreover, upon the positing of a fundamental split between the critical scrutiny of an autonomous subject or group of subjects and the accessible content of a passive object. According to this subject/object split, the goal is to ascertain the ideal content — the "message" — which may then be communicated either doctrinally, as in the five points of Calvinism or the five points of fundamentalism, or experientially, as in the "love of God and love of neighbor" espoused by liberalism. Either way, revelation is more an abstract object of investigation than a concrete, living subject that speaks, and continues to speak, in the church's life.

Under the pressures of this narrow epistemological framework, the modern church has tried to make its canonical Scriptures carry more probative freight than they can possibly bear. At least since the advent of modernity and perhaps even before that, the church has tended to transmute its Scriptures from interpretive framework — or canon — into an epistemological criterion for truth.³¹ Today we see interpreters straining to force the Scriptures to produce precise answers to questions that the biblical authors themselves could never have imagined.

By contrast, deconstruction conceives of its investigation as a ceaseless, open-ended task, for to arrive at a final totality of meaning in the text would, by definition, exclude the need for further reading and reflection. Language is

30. In French, while the verb *différer* can mean either "to differ" or "to defer," the noun *différence* means only, "difference." Derrida coins a new word, *différance*, to insinuate both.

31. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*.

not ours to wield or control, and texts often operate to disrupt our sense of self-possessive ownership. Deconstruction is not an arbitrary act of the interpreter; rather, its questions are provoked by the texts themselves.

In addition, the purpose of Derrida's analysis is not just theoretical but also practical. The point is that the reader should return again and again to the text and that such returning makes authentic moral action possible. To be open to more than one possibility, according to Derrida, is the precondition of justice.³² It is the plumbing of alternative meanings that leads to understanding, and the elimination of alternative meanings, to violence. In short, the movement beyond totality represented by the deconstructive moment in postmodern thought is not meant necessarily to eviscerate religion and morality but to give them their necessary orientation and direction. To be faithfully engaged requires a loyalty to something beyond the confines of a self-enclosed totality. So then, a deconstructive approach to meaning begins by inquiring into what our various construals of meaning may have left hidden or excluded. At all events, a deconstructive reading resists any premature totality of meaning.

Just as with the movement beyond foundations, so also the movement beyond totality can be deeply unsettling, and it likewise engenders real resistance among some Christians. Much of modern theology, in fact, has been a sustained effort precisely to exclude anything beyond totality. This reflects the fact that one of the features of a certain type of modernity is the belief that all reality is thought to cohere, that it constitutes an ascertainable totality. And if so, then this whole ought to be subject to description under the tutelage of a single, self-consistent body of knowledge. Included in this monolithic passion for totality, however, is a zeal to eliminate all that is thought not to cohere with truth, to do away with anything that does not fit or conform.

In the world of modernity, this passion for totality has reached a new and obsessive intensity that sometimes defies common sense.³³ It can lead to hegemonies of every sort, from the pretense of scientism to the absurdities of fundamentalism. And, when modulated into a theological key, this aim for completeness can lead to the view that the whole — the totality — is but one grand system of God. In one sense, this is the vision that the tradition of sys-

32. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le 'fondement mystique de l'autorité'* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), ET "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67.

33. Perhaps the chief exemplar of this drive for totality has been Hegel, who summed up the whole of his story. In contemporary theology its chief exponent, no doubt, is Wolfhart Pannenberg, though the tendency is found in many theologians.

tematic theology from the nineteenth century forward has tried to achieve. The things of salvation — incarnation, atonement, the reign of God — are all seen as features of the divine self-realization in history. That history, in turn, is comprehensible and discloses a certain pattern of intelligibility, a pattern that the enlightened mind can discern, if only by the light of revelation. Yet it is revelation that makes possible the coherence of a complete rational system.

And this, I think, is the key point. Revelation in modern perspective comes to be construed, not as the disruption of all humanly conceived totalities, nor as the calling into question of our premature "take" on the whole, but as an enlightenment by which we believe we can finally make sense of the encompassing all.

This predilection for an all-embracing totality is by no means the only way to interpret the world. The drive for totality in the modern world is a powerful one, but it has led to an ironic result. In his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard argues that the key change brought about by postmodernity is the reluctance of people today to give credence to the overarching and monolithic perspectives of modern rationality.³⁴ The result is a pervasive cynicism toward the institutions, values, and lofty goals bequeathed to us from the past. We are living in an age marked by what Lyotard calls "an incredulity toward metanarratives." Put more colloquially, the age in which we are living is the age of "Whatever . . ."

The "metanarratives" of which Lyotard speaks are the grand, self-legitimizing interpretive frameworks according to which we modern people seek to define our world as complete and whole. A metanarrative is the omniscient rationale according to which all individual narratives are thought to find their larger meaning and purpose. Prior to the onset of modernity, it was our very own Christian story of creation, reconciliation, and redemption that provided orientation to Western thought. The modern world did not simply abolish this metanarrative but began retelling it in its own way. Even as it increasingly distanced itself from the master story of Christianity, modernity generated alternative interpretive stories, each seeking to trump the rest: capitalism, Marxism, liberalism, socialism, Freudianism, scientism, and so on. Yet none of these modern metanarratives, according to Lyotard, can be said to embrace the one objective truth, for each turns out to be just one more competing form of discourse.

The paradoxical result is that the more modernity sought to redescribe

34. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, THL 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

the whole, the more it prompted the proliferation of knowledge into multiple subdisciplines, each with its own language game, each with its own rules for the determination of meaning. The more metanarratives there are, the more they lose their power not only to explain but to persuade. To the extent that postmodern experience becomes a shifting back and forth between a set of incommensurable language games, each designed to accommodate a different human need, knowledge itself becomes a subject for manipulation, a commodity to be used, recycled, and then used again. The net result is a lapse into the incredulity that Lyotard believes now defines the postmodern age.

In a way, postmodernity is the recognition that all the many "isms" of modernity have only a relative validity — not that they have no validity, but that they can have no overarching and hegemonic validity. It is against this backdrop that the theological challenge to move beyond foundations and beyond totality must be interpreted. Moving beyond foundations means thinking through the narrative of Christian faith without reducing it to just one more "ism" of modernity. Moving beyond totality means rediscovering the premodern Christian tradition's recognition that the story we are telling is multivalent and open-ended.³⁵ Only if we move beyond foundations and beyond totality might we be enabled to break out of the confines of any particular "ism" in order to embrace the Other.

III. Toward the Other

If the faithful reading of Scripture has traditionally required a rule of faith, together with a rule of hope, it needs also to employ a rule of love. The injunction to move beyond foundations and beyond totality must be completed in a movement toward the Other. This emphasis on otherness is one of the most promising in the postmodern repertoire, and it is a theme that finds its most prominent voice in the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.³⁶ Levinas's philosophy is a relentless critique of all totalizing forms of reason that make no place for the Other.³⁷

This primacy of otherness has three distinct connotations. First, there is the philosophical meaning. The Other can be understood as anything or anyone that falls outside one's own categories. The realm of one's own selfhood, or what Levinas calls the "same," is constantly confronted by that which is other. The challenge is to refrain from violation by reducing the Other to this self-enclosed realm of the same.

Second, there is the ethical meaning. Ethically speaking, the (capitalized) Other is the poor, the oppressed, the weak, the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst — a familiar usage with deep biblical resonance. We are all too familiar with the "othering" that takes place in human life in which some person or group is vilified or turned into an outcast. Levinas turns this around and claims that to confront the Other is to find oneself on hallowed ground. Understood as the stranger or neighbor near at hand, the Other makes a moral claim upon my sensibility and compassion, a claim that exerts itself not from within my own subjectivity and consciousness but from without.

Third, there is the temporal meaning, which for Levinas has an explicitly messianic and political connotation. The Other is that which is to come, and specifically the liberating state of affairs that is yet to come, the future that is still awaited as a realm of justice and peace. This third sense is deeply resonant with the Jewish yearning for the Messiah. In his resolutely ethical version of philosophy, Levinas can speak of a messianic vocation incumbent upon each person in realizing his or her election. There is a way in which each person has a vocation to respond right here, at this very moment, to the specific "Other" for whom that person is uniquely responsible.

In some ways, this third dimension is the most important for biblical hermeneutics. It is now generally agreed that the reader always comes to the biblical text with a certain preunderstanding, including certain questions and expectations. One of these questions is, What are we waiting or hoping for? Different versions of postmodernity come to the text with different answers. For some nihilistic postmodernists, the answer is clear: We are waiting for nothing. For Christians and Jews, the answer is a different one: We come to the text waiting for the Redeemer to show us the way into the reign of God.

In all three of its connotations — philosophical, ethical, and temporal-political — the "Other" is not a projection of my own interiority but an exteriority that shatters the protective totality I have constructed around myself. The Other marks an infinity "beyond being" and "beyond totality" that claims me and will not let me go, giving me my unique vocation of responsibility to this need, right here, at this very moment. I must move beyond the foundations of my own selfhood, beyond the limitations of my own version

35. See David C. Steinmetz, "Uncovering a Second Narrative," Brian E. Daley, SJ, "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?" and Gary A. Anderson, "Joseph and the Passion of Our Lord," in this volume.

36. For a treatment of Levinas's contribution to interpretation, see Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

37. This is nowhere better captured than in Levinas's magnum opus: Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), ET *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

of the totality of meaning and truth, and toward the Other who claims me from on high. To read the Scriptures with this in mind and act accordingly is to experience the God who is not only *for* us and *with* us but also already at work *among* us.

Conclusion

It has often been argued that biblical interpreters need a larger theological framework within which to think if biblical meaning is rightly to be discerned.³⁸ If so, then the task set before us here is one of understanding that framework in a more open-ended and eschatological way. While some of what a postmodern way of thinking seems to demand may strike us as overly technical and far removed from the task of gaining purchase on biblical meaning, there are ways in which the movement beyond foundations, beyond totality, and toward the Other has a certain resonance with what Christians have always wanted to claim. First, God is *for* us in a way that transcends every humanly conceived foundation for knowing. Second, in the concreteness of Jesus' suffering on the cross, God is *with* us in a self-donation that no premodern totality can contain. Third, in the power of the Spirit, God is at work *among* us, beckoning us as well to be *for* and *with* the Other. This confession — God *for* us, Christ *with* us, and the Spirit *among* us — sets the framework for all faithful reading of the Scriptures.

38. A classical example is that of John Calvin. See "Subject Matter of the Present Work," from the French edition of 1560 of Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 6.

Preaching Scripture Faithfully in a Post-Christendom Church

Christine McSpadden

As a small study community of fifteen scholars and pastors, the authors of this volume embarked on a project to "recover the church's rich heritage of biblical interpretation" as it might speak to the church today — a church that finds itself in a post-Christendom era, seeking to communicate with a postmodern world. We came to nine central affirmations, or theses, about the interpretation of Scripture. Throughout this volume, we have sought to clarify, describe, illustrate, and flesh out what it might look like to read Scripture "theologically," in light of these affirmations.

This essay now turns to the question, very live for the foreseeable future, of how to communicate faithfully and effectively the gospel of Jesus Christ as portrayed in the biblical witness of the Old and New Testaments. More specifically, this essay explores the challenges of preaching in the contemporary mainline church environment and suggests ideas and strategies for preaching faithful, scriptural sermons in the post-Christendom church.

Dynamics of the Post-Christendom Church

Since the eighteenth century, Christianity has been losing ground as the great Western culture-religion. With a rising emphasis on human reason, the reading of Scripture has become a discipline modeled more on the sciences than on the humanities. Increasingly, science has replaced theology as a way of apprehending reality and of understanding our relationship with the world. At the same time, an increased secularization of society, a greater awareness of the plurality of religions, and an erosion of institutional authority in general have all weakened Christianity's stronghold.

