

Two Approaches to Theology and Their Implications for Preaching

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What should happen in the congregation as a result of hearing a sermon? The response to this question is partly determined by the approaches to theology held by the preacher and the congregation. In current theological discussion, two perspectives are especially prominent.¹ One is frequently known as postliberalism. The other is often called revisionary theology.

The two positions would agree with my colleague Joe R. Jones that “the church is that community of persons called into being by the gospel of Jesus Christ to witness in word and deed to the living God for the benefit of the world.”² But postliberals and revisionists differ on how best to determine and to make that witness.³ Their differences have implications for preaching.

In this article, I briefly sketch the background of this discussion. I then compare and contrast the postliberal and revisionist visions. I specify the nature, purpose, and characteristics of the sermon in each model. Along the way, I indicate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

The Enlightenment Background and Its Breakdown

The contemporary conversation between these two schools results from the breakdown of the Enlightenment model of authority. As most of us remember from History of Western Civilization 101, the Enlightenment was that pivotal period when empirical observation became the norm for truth. According to the Enlightenment, an idea, event or thing could be regarded as true only when it could be observed through one of the five senses. Careful empirical investigation led to the formulation of the laws of nature. These laws (and all truth discovered through the scientific method) were universally valid. Prior to the Enlightenment, most civilizations were primitive and superstitious. The scientific method was the means to liberation from unsophisticated superstition and magic.

In the church, the Enlightenment’s confidence in the scientific method opened the now famous hermeneutical gap. Why should people who relied upon empirical verification for their understanding of the world turn to archaic sources (the Bible and church doctrines) as the primary guides for their religious life, especially when the formative events of the Bible (the crossing of the Red Sea, the resurrection of Jesus) violated natural law? Even more seriously, the church in the Enlightenment found it difficult to speak confidently about an invisible, untouchable God who could not be clinically examined.

Hence, one of the major tasks of the preacher was to show how Christian belief could be intellectually possible in the light of the imperial claims of the scientific world view. One of the major tasks of hermeneutics was to help the preacher “bridge the gap” between the Bible (with its prescientific, superstitious worldview) and now.

However, in the last generations, the Enlightenment synthesis has broken down.⁴ Scientists have begun to note the relativity of their own conclusions. A theory that

seems assured today can be made obsolete by fresh angles of vision or by the discovery of new data. Contemporary society can no longer have unquestioned confidence in the conclusions of science (or in the scientific method as the central route to truth).

Furthermore, philosophers and social scientists call attention to the fact that all perception is an act of interpretation.⁵ Human beings cannot gather interpretation-free data; every person perceives the world through inbuilt points of view and prejudices that result from our nationality, economic class, gender, race, social place, political orientation, religious conviction.⁶

Many of these interpretive grids are unconscious. But that makes them unusually powerful because they silently and uncritically guide our perception. They orient us to see and value certain entities and experiences and to overlook and devalue others. Indeed, some thinkers charge that many (perhaps all) statements of truth are little more than supports by which privileged persons or classes shore up their privilege. For instance, some texts in the Bible presume the superiority of the male; they do so (at least in part) in order to legitimate male privilege.

Therefore, human beings must be suspicious of every claim to truth and power. Some people benefit from the interpretation of truth in a given setting, nearly always to the detriment of others. In the worst instances, the dominant group's view of the world and its legitimation of power lead to the abuse, oppression, and death of minority groups.

With respect to authority in North America today, the two most descriptive words are pluralism and relativism. Our society recognizes a plurality of authorities and norms. And it recognizes the relativities of each. None automatically has the highest hand. Different (and sometimes contradictory) views of ultimate reality vie alongside one another in the marketplace for human commitment and loyalty. The contemporary pluralistic and relativistic community acknowledges the right of each to exist and "to make its pitch" (to put it crudely).

Postliberalism and revisionary theology are two responses to the breakdown of the Enlightenment synthesis and to the emergence of pluralism and relativism. How does the preacher best formulate a witness to the living God for the benefit of a post-Enlightenment world?

The central issue is the nature and method of the witness of the sermon and the church. Does the preacher simply assert the claims of the gospel (postliberalism) or does the preacher attempt to demonstrate why the claims of the gospel can be accepted as credible in contemporary culture (revisionary theology)?

Postliberalism: Preaching Stakes the Claims of the Gospel

The roots of postliberalism are in the work of Yale theologians Hans Frei⁷ and George Lindbeck.⁸ Two of its most popular exponents are William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.⁹ Writing in 1974, Frei complained that the biblical hermeneutics of his day was misguided. Frei began with narratives in the Bible. He lamented that biblical scholars (and systematic theologians who drew upon their work) reduced the meaning of the narrative to a proposition. In the process of reduction from story to idea, significant (if not always fully describable) dimensions of meaning were lost. The reigning approach of biblical hermeneutics held the possibilities for meaning in the biblical text accountable to the scientific worldview, a standard of reference outside the Bible itself. In order to be meaningful, those aspects of the Bible that could not be

verified by the empirical method had to be jettisoned. The only parts of the text to be retained were those that could be housed comfortably in the scientific worldview. Those aspects of the text are true that can be confirmed by the empirical method. This remainder of meaning illustrated universal principles of religious truth.

Instead, Frei proposed for the biblical interpreter and theologian to begin with another presupposition. *Begin* with the Bible (and other normative Christian texts) as naming the standards by which the community would discern the meaning of faith and life. Instead of holding the Bible hostage to the scientific method, let the Bible furnish the normative description of the world for the church. The community of faith would read the Bible as it does any realistic narrative, recognizing that some of its details were not historically accurate (in the empirically attestable sense) but still trusting its description of reality to be true.

From Frei's insights, and other studies, Lindbeck developed the "cultural-linguistic" approach to understanding religion. This approach regards religious texts (including the Bible and Christian doctrine) as describing reality from the point of view of the culture that reveres those texts. At the same time, the language of the religion and its practices shapes the culture itself. The faithful community does not measure religious claims against norms outside of the religion (for example, the scientific worldview) but describes it from inside its own presuppositions, stories, doctrines, and rules. The task of the biblical scholar, theologian, preacher, and church is fundamentally descriptive. The leader of the church clarifies the Christian worldview, its claims and their implications for belief and action.

At the present time, the church makes its witness in a larger setting (idolatrous North America with its insidious bents toward consumerism, racism, individualism, militarism, sexism, classicism) that is inimical to the Christian story. In the vivid image of Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, the church is a subculture of resident aliens. The church resides within the larger culture, but the stories, values, and practices of the community of the faithful are alien to the dominant stories, values, and practices of the larger culture. The church is God's colony whose purpose is to witness to the gospel and its values.

The church witnesses by announcing the Christian story and calling the larger community to embrace that story. Hauerwas and Willimon put the matter pungently. "The coming of Christ has cosmic implications. He has changed the course of things. So the theological task is not merely the interpretive matter of translating Jesus into modern categories but rather to translate the world to him. The theologian's job is not to make the gospel credible to the modern world, but *to make the world credible to the gospel*."¹⁰

In the sermon, the preacher describes the world as it is narrated by the Bible and helps the community understand how the contemporary world can be shaped by the biblical one. The preacher does not try to justify the believability of Christian witness in terms of the scientific worldview (or any other criterion that is external to the gospel itself). The preacher is not an apologist who tries to show how Christianity is reasonable within the worldview but an expositor who explores and explains the Christian faith and its effects and benefits. Along the way, the preacher contrasts the Christian faith and its values and world with those of the prevailing culture.¹¹

The preacher and the church do not aim to transform North American culture by engaging the culture on its own terms. The church simply lives within the culture

according to Christian values. The church is a light to the Gentiles, embodying a gospel-shaped world in its own life. The extended community should be able to see that light and be drawn to it.

This view is very attractive. It calls the preacher to have a precise understanding of the Christian faith and its texts on their own terms. It bestows identity and mission on the church. It offers the church an unambiguous interpretive axis along which to measure the quality of the interior life of the Christian community and the exterior life of the world. It forcefully warns the preacher and the church from too easily accommodating (and even selling out) the gospel to the culture. Hauerwas and Willimon, particularly, stress the importance of conforming the ethical behavior of the church to gospel values; this is crucial in an era threatened by the ultimate violence of nuclear holocaust and in which many relationships are mini-holocausts. These are powerful benchmarks as a preacher plots a sermon.

Yet, the perspective is also troubling.¹² Three points are especially nettlesome. First, how do postliberal preachers know they are telling the truth? To be sure, the post-Enlightenment world does not have a universal standard of truth (such as scientific verification). But the reasoning of the postliberals is circular. The gospel is true, they imply, *because* it functions as the center of the community. Furthermore, among the lasting residue of the Enlightenment is the driving human desire to know *why* things are the way they are. The postliberal preacher needs to be able to answer the question, “Why can a congregation believe that the sermon is true as over and against some other construals of reality?” Without such a basis, the postliberal preacher has conceded completely to relativism. Can the preacher point to some evidence (perhaps in history or in contemporary experience) that confirms the truth of the preacher’s claims?

Second, the postliberals are in danger of sectarianism, that is, of withdrawing from the larger world into its private colony. Of course, the church tries to let its light shine so that the other colonies in the culture can see it and follow it. But if the church does not directly engage the culture, the culture can easily overlook its witness. The postliberal preacher speaks within the Christian community to the community. Can the preacher help the church find ways of engaging the larger culture that preserves the integrity of the Christian witness and yet finds some common ground with traditions and movements?

Third, postliberals sometimes speak blithely of Christianity as if it is a univocal phenomenon. This bypasses one of the most exciting and vexing emphases of recent Christian discussion: pluralism within the Bible and within the extended Christian tradition and community. The Christianity of Paul, the Fourth Gospel, John of Damascus, Augustine, Wesley, Charles Parham, and Pat Robertson all have a common core. But they also contain quite different nuances. The postliberal preacher has no norm by which to gauge which nuances are more (or less) authoritative. Pastors who respect the particular linguisticity of a text, can preach the Fourth Gospel’s realized eschatology one Sunday and Paul’s apocalypticism the next. Which (if either) ought to guide the Christian community’s understanding of eschatology?

Fourth, postliberals often have difficulty dealing with theologically or morally problematic texts and teachings in the Christian house. To take a simple example, the Bible typically assumes the validity of slavery as a human institution. The Bible attempts to regulate and “humanize” slavery.¹³ The eschatological world will eliminate slavery. But in the meantime, the Bible generally concedes that slavery will

continue. Postliberal preachers have difficulty formulating a norm that allows them to show why such texts, though included in Christian linguisticity, are not longer authoritative.¹⁴

Revisionary Theology: Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation

Revisionary theology is particularly associated with the University of Chicago's David Tracy.¹⁵ Others associated with this movement include Gordon Kaufman,¹⁶ Schubert Ogden,¹⁷ and John B. Cobb, Jr.¹⁸ The revisionary theologians believe that the basic problem facing the Christian community is much as it was in the Enlightenment and its aftermath. Can the Christian faith (and its primary texts and doctrines) be intellectually credible? Is it possible for a person to have a contemporary post-Enlightenment view of the world and to be a Christian at the same time?

The revisionary movement intends to be both apologetic, evangelistic, and socially transformative. Revisionists attempt to defend the plausibility of the gospel in the face of challenges to it from the contemporary world. By making Christian faith plausible, the revisionary theologians hope to make it more inviting to today's sophisticated people. The revisionary thinkers hope that a gospel that is friendly to the constructs of the contemporary world can help transform that world into a place that is more shaped by gospel values. Revisionists are often quick to enter the public arena in the hope of influencing North American society to become more loving and just.

The revisionist theologians emphasize the hermeneutical gap between the pre-Enlightenment world that generated the Bible (and the primary doctrines and ideas of the Christian community) and the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment world of today's church. For technologically sophisticated late twentieth-century persons who measure life in computer bytes, it is not immediately clear as to why a community could think that ultimate reality is revealed in a dead Jewish male who lived in a primitive, even superstitious, culture.

A fundamental issue is truth. What is the nature of truth itself? What are the criteria by which a community determines the true and the false? Out of the vast catalogue of the claims in the Bible and the Christian tradition, which are true and which are not? The revisionary movement uses these questions to set the stage on which to evaluate the truthfulness of the Christian faith and its tenets.

Revisionary theologians call for theology and the witness of the church to have a public character. By the term "public," they mean that the truth claims of the Christian community must be legitimated (or delegitimated) according to standards of truth that are commonly recognized in the human community and that are universally true. The church seeks to correlate the teaching and beliefs of the Christian tradition with the teaching and beliefs of the contemporary world. The revisionist project is thus clearly in the stream of Enlightenment thinking. But there are crucial differences.

The revisionists adopt an old understanding of truth as the correspondence between appearance and reality. The criterion of truth is thus experience itself. An idea, text, or claim is true if it corresponds to actual (or possible) experience.

An important distinction between the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment views of experience comes into play. For the Enlightenment, experience is that which can be received and clinically observed through the five senses. Truth is thus almost purely a matter of cognition and rationality. The revisionists (in accord with many post-Enlightenment thinkers) see experience in a much larger and deeper frame of

reference. Experience is all that happens to (and in) a person or community, including feelings and awarenesses that cannot be described with clinical precision. The eminent University of Chicago theologian Bernard Meland speaks of experience having a "More" that goes beyond the capacity of scientific description but that is a part of the depth of every experience.¹⁹ The revisionary theologian asks, "Are the truth claims of the Bible, Christian doctrine, and other Christian texts, ideas, and practices confirmed in the expanded notion of experience of the post-Enlightenment world?"

A corollary. Traffic runs both ways along the bridge of experience. The enlarged post-Enlightenment notion of truth means that the preacher must sometimes challenge the church (and the church must sometimes challenge the larger culture) to realize that its perception of actual (and possible) experience is too limited. The finitude of the church and the culture may diminish their perceptions of reality and its potential. The church or the community may need to enlarge its awareness of what is fully happening (and able to happen).

This relates to a further difference between the Enlightenment Christian witness and the post-Enlightenment revisionary Christian witness. The Enlightenment preacher sought to correlate the Christian tradition with the scientific worldview using the empirical method as the standard. The preacher accommodated the Christian message to Enlightenment consciousness. The revisionist theologians call for *mutual* critical correlation.²⁰ On the one hand, the church does correlate its tradition and its interpretation of reality with that of the contemporary world. On the other hand, the church challenges the contemporary world at points at which the church finds the contemporary world and its interpretation of reality to be inadequate.

Like the postliberal theologians, the revisionary Christian leaders want to understand a Christian text or teaching in the light of its own cultural and linguistic uniqueness. However, the revisionary theologians do not assume that every text is authoritative in the contemporary Christian community. Each component of Christian witness (including each biblical text) must be validated by criteria which can be discussed in the public arena.

The revisionists formulate universally valid criteria by which to articulate and evaluate the Christian witness. The first is appropriateness to the gospel.²¹ The revisionist movements identify the universal essence of the gospel and use that essence as a norm by which to evaluate all claims made in the Christian house. Different revisionary theologians formulate this essence in different ways but Clark Williamson offers a summary that most would find acceptable when he says that the gospel is "the good news that God graciously and freely offers the divine love to each and all (oneself included) and that this God who loves all the creatures therefore commands that justice be done to them."²² The steady practitioner of mutual critical correlation will also ask whether a fresh text, doctrine, or situation compels the preacher and the church to reformulate their understanding of the gospel.

Based on the notion of truth as the correspondence of appearance and reality, the criterion of intelligibility emerges.²³ The preacher asks whether a text or doctrine or idea or possibility is understandable within the contemporary worldview. In the spirit of mutual critical correlation, the preacher ought also to ask whether the Christian tradition can help the contemporary culture enrich its grasp of the intelligible.

Some theologians indebted to revisionism add a third criterion: moral plausibility. Does a text, teaching or action advocate the moral treatment of all concerned?²⁴

I hasten to repeat that in the revisionary model, the use of these criteria can spark the community to re-examine the content of criteria themselves and other aspects of the worldview of the revisionist church. Otherwise, the preacher and congregation are not engaging in *mutual* critical correlation.

In the revisionist model, then, the vocation of the preacher is mutual critical correlation. The preacher takes a biblical text (or a Christian doctrine, claim, topic, or practice) and shows how its claims (or significant parts thereof) can be adapted to the contemporary setting. Or, the preacher begins with a contemporary event, practice, or idea and shows how mutual critical correlation with the Christian tradition illumines the contemporary material (and perhaps how it illumines some aspect of the tradition). In the process, the preacher seeks to determine the degree to which Christian tradition or contemporary setting is appropriate to the gospel, intelligible, and moral.

This approach has great strengths. It gives the preacher a firm foundation on which to ask the congregation to accept and act on the claims of the sermon. "I am offering (or asking) that which is confirmed by experience." It allows the congregation to hold a faith that is integrated into the contemporary worldview. Yet, that faith is not imprisoned by the relativities of contemporaneity. Indeed, it can call contemporaneity into question. The criteria of appropriateness, intelligibility, and moral plausibility give the preacher a clear and comprehensive theological method for evaluating biblical passages, Christian tradition, and contemporary ideas and events. The revisionary model provides for continuity in the essence of Christianity while allowing for adaptation in the light of fresh perspectives and circumstances. The revisionist preacher has a clean framework within which to understand and criticize fresh perspectives from the sciences, the social sciences, the arts, and other sources. Because the church and the culture appeal to the same standard of truth, the church can easily take part in the great conversations of late twentieth-century North America.

Yet, the revisionist model also has soft spots.²⁵ The effort to make the gospel at home in the contemporary world can so dilute the content of the church's witness that Christian distinctiveness can dissolve; the Christian witness can be interpreted as nothing more than a rehash of the latest pop movements. The preacher must not compromise the essence of Christian faith (even while being open to discussing the content of that essence).

Revisionism's understanding of truth is widely shared by Euro-Americans in the United States and Canada. But the disciples of radical post-Enlightenment thought charge that the revisionary notion of truth is simply one understanding among a plurality of understandings. The post-Enlightenment world has discovered that understanding of truth is dependent upon context and community. In different eras and in different communities (especially today), truth is understood differently. The revisionists, so this attack goes, have taken their particular, limited, relative notion of truth and have made it universal.

The revisionary theologians acknowledge their own relativity and the importance of interpretation in their scheme. Indeed, the hermeneutic of mutual critical correlation calls them to be perpetually assessing the satisfaction of their interpretations of truth and reality. But they see their interpretation of reality as more sufficient than any other currently known to them. In any event, the hard-core revisionary theologians assert that if something is true, it is universally true. Otherwise, church and culture are hopelessly awash on the shoals of relativity. The church has no firm warrant by which

to offer its gospel to the world and no firm place to stand as the basis for its criticism of itself and its larger cultural setting. Anything goes. The only standard is personal preference. Disorder, chaos, and anarchy are the ultimate destinations of a world based on radical relativity.

Furthermore, since science constantly revises its own claims, the revisionary preacher is not on such firm ground by appealing to experience. That which seems certain or possible today may seem uncertain or impossible tomorrow. To build the Christian house on an empirically based understanding of truth is to build it on sand. To this, the revisionists reply that this is precisely what the church has done for centuries: adapt its theology and self-understanding to new environments of perception and knowledge. The key is for the preacher to be critical of this process.

Postliberalism is especially fearful that revisionism ultimately relies not on the distinctiveness of Christianity for its interpretation of reality but on a body of general experience shared by other religions. The revisionists are in danger of losing those elements that are essential to Christianity.

Conclusion

The preacher is not fundamentally called to be a postliberal or a revisionist but a witness to the Christian gospel. However, awareness of these two positions and their strong and weak points can help preachers formulate a sufficient testimony to the Good News.

Few theologians, churches or preachers are pure examples of the postliberal approach to theology or to the revisionary model. Most of the preachers who identify with one stream incorporate qualities of the other. For instance, the postliberal who appeals to the fact that a certain text has proven helpful in the experience of previous generations moves in the direction of revisionism. Revisionary preachers look in the direction of postliberalism when they follow Joseph Sittler (who moved in the stream of theology that is precursor to revisionism) in believing that they must “declare as a gift of God” that which they “do not fully possess.”²⁶

When we look at these positions as poles on a spectrum, the strengths and weakness of each (and the tension between them) helps us become more critical of our own preaching. At the risk of confusing the characteristics of the postliberal and revisionist approaches, I end with questions suggested from each perspective that a preacher might ask of a particular sermon or that ministers might use as a guide to thinking critically about their preaching over the past few months.

Do I respect the cultural and linguistic integrity of a text or other Christian teaching or practice? That is, do I perceive it (insofar as possible) in *its* own terms or do I perceive it as a projection of my own worldview, theology, or practice?

At what points am I sufficiently holding out the distinctiveness of the Christian message? At what points am I in danger of selling out? Does my preaching confront the idolatrous, unfaithful, and sinful qualities of contemporary culture? Do I help the congregation have a full and clear picture of how their perceptions of reality could be shaped by the gospel?

Do my sermons, over time, create an image of Christian faith that is coherent? Do my sermons take account of the pluralisms and relativities of Christianity but in such a way that they are consistent with one another?

Does my preaching draw from, and speak to, the full range of the congregation's

breadth and depth of experience? In addition to making full use of sense data, do I help the community get in touch with the More?

The social, historical, intellectual, or psychological context of a sermon may suggest particular emphases.²⁷ Is the setting of my sermon(s) one in which the community needs simply to hear Christian claims staked? Or, additionally, do I need to offer the community warrants for belief and action that can sustain them through the intellectual and social challenges that sometimes spit in the face of Christian witness these days?²⁸

Am I thinking clearly about moments when it seems right (both as a strategy of witness and as a matter of Christian identity) to let the Christian message shine as a light among the Gentiles, and moments when it seems important to engage the culture directly on issues of substance?

As a preacher, and as a church, are we confident in our witness, yet respectful of others who make different witnesses? Why should the congregation (and others beyond it) believe the Christian witness? What is persuasive about a Christian claim in comparison and contrast with other claims?

The post-Enlightenment world continually reminds the preacher of the relativities of every formulation of the Christian message.²⁹ A preacher could easily be paralyzed by awareness of finitude. Fortunately, however, the gospel has the capacity to transcend particular theologies and homiletical approaches. To God be the glory!

NOTES

¹ In the course of a short article I cannot deal with other prominent movements, such as fundamentalism, evangelicalism, the remnants of neo-orthodoxy, and the various liberation theologies. I focus on postliberalism and revisionary theology because their leaders are widely quoted in the historic denominations but are not always understood.

² Joe R. Jones, "On Doing Church Theology Today," *Encounter* 40 (1979): 279-280.

³ The best delineation of these two positions is William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

⁴ Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 26.

⁵ Most interpreters speak of human consciousness being divided into three eras: the premodern period (from the dawn of consciousness to the Enlightenment), the modern period (from the Enlightenment to the present), the postmodern period (beginning in the last generation). The post-Enlightenment period as I am describing it is thus sometimes known as postmodernism. For overviews of postmodernism, see Darrell Jodock, *The Church's Bible* (Minneapolis: The Westminster Press, 1989), 51-67 and James B. Miller, "The Emerging Postmodern World," in *Postmodern Theology*, ed. Frederic Burnham (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1989), 1-19.

⁶ The basic work is Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), cf. David Tracy, "Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm," trans. Margaret Kohl, in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, ed. Hans Kung and David Tracy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1989), 34-62.

⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 20ff. and Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso Publishing Co., 1991). For examples of ideology criticism, see the essays in *Semeia* 59 (1992).

⁸ E.g., Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

⁹ E.g., George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Of their many writings, one of their joint publications is especially concise in relationship to our topic, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24. Authors' emphasis.

¹² This is exceptionally clear in Willimon's sermons for established Christian communities, e.g., *On a Wild and Windy Mountain* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the*

Baptized (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co , 1992) It is also clear in his sermons intended for evangelism (but largely preached in settled Christian communities), *The Intrusive Word* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co , 1994) Especially fascinating are the sermons by Willimon and the commentary on them by Hauerwas in their joint volume *Preaching to Strangers* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992)

¹³ See Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 166-168

¹⁴ However, my colleague Charles Allen point out that postliberals do permit occasional *ad hoc* apologetics

¹⁵ Contemporary people should not equate slavery in the ancient world with slavery in the antebellum southern part of the United States Indeed, selected forms of slavery offered positive possibilities for people in the ancient world For example, see Dale Martin, *Slavery as Salvation* (New Haven Yale University Press, 1990) and Gregory Churchigno, *Debt Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield JSOT Press, 1993) However, today's world almost universally regards slavery as an unsatisfactory mode of human relationship

¹⁶ For examples of a postliberal wrestling with difficult matters, see Lindbeck, 55-63, 91 104, 113-124 William C Placher struggles with such issues in his *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* (Louisville Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), as does Katherine Tanner in her *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1988) and *The Politics of God* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1992)

¹⁷ Note especially David Tracy's *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York Seabury Press, 1975), *The Analogical Imagination* (New York Crossroad Publishing Co , 1981), *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco Harper and Row Publishers, 1990)

¹⁸ See Gordon Kaufman's *Systematic Theology A Historicist Perspective* (New York Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), *God the Problem* (Cambridge Harvard University Press, 1972), *An Essay On Theological Method* (Missoula Scholars Press, 1975), *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1981), *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1985)

¹⁹ See Schubert Ogden's *The Reality of God* (New York Harper and Row Publishers, 1966), *Faith and Freedom Toward a Theology of Liberation* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1979), *The Point of Christology* (New York Harper and Row Publishers, 1982), *On Theology* (New York Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), *Is There Only One True Religion Or Are There Many?* (Dallas Southern Methodist University Press, 1992)

²⁰ See Marjorie Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*, New Revised Edition (New York Crossroad Publishing Co , 1990), *The End of Evil* (Albany State University of New York Press, 1988), *The Fall to Violence* (New York Continuum, 1994)

²¹ Cobb's corpus is voluminous See his *A Christian Natural Theology* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1965), *Liberal Christianity at the Crossroads* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1973), *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia The Westminster Press, 1975), with Charles Birch, *The Liberation of Life* (New York Oxford University Press, 1981), *Death or Dialogue* (London SCM Press and Philadelphia Trinity Press International, 1990), *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1993)

²² See Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1982), *Models of God* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1982), *The Body of God* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1993)

²³ None of the recent revisionist theologians believes in a "pure" prelinguistic experience

²⁴ Bernard E Meland, *Fallible Forms and Symbols* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1961), xiii, 43, 48-49, 174-175

²⁵ A classic expression of critical correlation is Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol I, 59-66 For *mutual* critical correlation see Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 15-27, 233-247

²⁶ See Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 238-240

²⁷ Clark M Williamson, "Preaching the Gospel Some Theological Reflections," *Encounter* 49 (1988), 191

²⁸ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 238-240

²⁹ For example, see Clark M Williamson and Ronald J Allen, *A Credible and Timely Word* (St Louis Chalice Press, 1991), 77-79

³⁰ Note, especially, Placher, *Unapologetic Theology*, 17-19, 160-161

³¹ Some philosophical and theological finesse is required here As Charles Allen points out (in correspondence), the notion of universal truth cannot make our *standards* of truth nonrelative Truth is absolute and universal Standards, warrants, and criteria are always relative "We believe in universal truth because (a) it is implied in the meaning of the word and (b) the gospel makes universal claims "

³² Joseph Sittler, *The Care of the Earth and Other University Sermons* (Philadelphia Fortress Press,

1964), 81

³³Placher himself acknowledges that current cultural circumstances are especially apt for postliberal emphases, 169

³⁴On philosophical grounds, postliberals may object strongly to this question. However, the brute fact is that human beings cry out to know *why* belief is even possible in our gut-wrenching world. The claim *that* it is possible is not always enough to satisfy the yearning heart.

³⁵Indeed, a pastor can easily idolize postliberalism or revisionism.