THE POSTMODERNIST CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

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Postmodernism poses a plethora of challenges to Christian theology. Those who are receptive to postmodernist ideas believe that Christian theology must abandon its residual attachments to modernism and embrace a new model more in accord with postmodernist thinking. Others are less radical, but still take postmodernism as a generally helpful development that can open theology to new avenues of thought and relevance. I disagree with both approaches.

Instead of attempting a comprehensive treatment of how theology should respond to postmodernism I will address a few areas of central concern to those facing the postmodernist challenge. First, given the postmodernist critique of language, some are claiming that an emphasis on the Bible as propositional revelation is problematic or even errant. They argue that our view of Scripture must be re-evaluated. Community should take precedent over doctrinal propositions. Second, along these lines, some claim that theology should be primarily narratival in nature and not systematic or abstract. Telling the Christian story should replace stipulating Christian doctrine. These contentions need a careful investigation if theology is to rise to the challenge of postmodernism.

Propositions, Truth, and Theology

Roughly stated, the task of Christian theology is to identify and articulate the revealed truths of Scripture in a logical, coherent, and compelling manner. As Carl Henry put it in the introduction to his magisterial six volume set, God, Revelation, and Authority: "The fundamental issue remains the issue of truth, the truth of theological assertions ... Durable theology must revive and preserve the distinction between true and false religion." Theology is not merely an endeavour of academic theologians, but the concern of every Christian who desires to understand and apply God’s truth for life and make it known to others. Consequently, our theology affects all that we do, whether or not we have thought it through systematically. It directs our sermons, our evangelism and

apologetics (or lack thereof), and our personal and social ethics. In other words, it is indispensable and inescapable. This underscores the urgency of developing a theology that is both faithful to Scripture and which speaks forcefully and truthfully to our postmodern situation.

Before assessing the critique of a propositionally oriented theology given by some evangelicals, we should first explain what is at issue. The defence of propositional revelation has always been a central tenet of evangelicalism and a primary plank in the debate over biblical inerrancy.

The correspondence view of truth, held by the vast majority of philosophers and theologians throughout history until recently, holds that any statement is true if and only if it corresponds to or agrees with factual reality. The statement, ‘the desk in my study is brown’, is true only if there is, in fact, a brown desk in my study. The statement, ‘there is no brown desk in my study’, would then be false because it fails to correspond to any objective state of affairs (i.e., to the facts of the matter). Or, as Christian philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff succinctly states it:

*If I believe of something that it is a duck, that is true of it if and only if it is a duck. And if that is indeed true of it, it is not true of it relative to some conceptual scheme. It is just true, period. Thoughts are true or false of things, period — not relative to something or other.*

There is no reason for theology to alter or adjust this definition of truth when it comes to Scripture as God’s revelation or with respect to the formulations of theological systems. Scripture presents God’s truth as objective, absolute, universal, eternal, antithetical, and systemic. In light of this, theology should affirm that the entire content of the Bible is true. Since Scripture is God’s word, every claim made in Scripture is factually accurate. Of course, Scripture gives us a wealth of literary forms – poetry, history, wisdom literature, prophecy, and more – but every form consists of propositional content. In other words, Scripture is informative and correct on every matter it addresses. It discloses knowledge about the nature of God, humanity, salvation, ethics, history, and things to come. This revelation came through a variety of cultures and individuals, but it is no less propositional for that.

The language of Scripture consists of more than declarative statements, such as ‘Jesus wept’. It also presents questions (Jesus’

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3 I cannot here give a defence of the doctrine of inerrancy, although it goes hand-in-hand with a propositional view of biblical revelation. The most detailed defence of inerrancy is found in Henry’s volumes. An excellent article on the logic of inerrancy is: J.P. Moreland, ‘The Rationality of Inerrancy,’ *Trinity Journal NS*, 1986, 75–86.
statement: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'), imperatives ('Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbour'), requests ('Lead us not into temptation') and exclamations ('Hallelujah!'), which are not, strictly speaking, propositional. Nevertheless, they are always presented in an intellectually rich environment of propositional truths and can be transposed into propositions quite easily. For example, God says, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery'. A command is not propositional because it does not refer to a state of affairs in itself, although it assumes several propositions. It is true that God gave this command, and it is true that adultery is immoral, because it violates God's very character and the kind of moral world that God made. The statement can be easily transposed into a proposition by saying, 'Adultery is morally wrong'. The foremost defender of propositional revelation of our time, Carl Henry is right on target: 'Regardless of the parables, allegories, emotive phrases and rhetorical questions used by these [biblical] writers, their literary devices have a logical point which can be propositionally formulated and is objectively true or false.'

Poetic utterances are also propositional, no matter how imaginative or emotional they may be. David cries out, 'Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow'. (Ps. 51:7). This is the metaphorical language of contrition, confession, and hope. It also makes claims on objective reality. Consider the some of the propositions it encompasses:

- David prayed this prayer.
- David needed to be forgiven by God, or, more poetically, 'cleansed' and 'washed'.
- God heard David's prayers.
- God forgave and restored David.
- David believed statements 1–4; and so on.

Certainly, God's revelation comes through historical events (supernatural or otherwise), personal experiences (Exod. 3; Is. 6; etc.), the witness of creation (Ps. 19; Rom. 1–2). But these modes of revelation are all communicative, intelligible, and informative: they can be understood in terms of propositions. An event wrought by God – such as the parting of the Red Sea or the resurrection of Christ – is not itself a proposition, but it is a fact that can be accurately described in propositions.

Divine revelation was given to people in various communities, but the source of the revelation was not the community, but God

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working through communities to make objective truth known. Henry's thesis is accurate, despite some postmodern detractors: 'God's revelation is rational communication conveyed in intelligible and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form.'  
Henry's concern was not postmodernism as much as neoorthodoxy and theological liberalism, but his point still stands.

Revelation in the Bible is essentially a mental conception: God's disclosure is rational and intelligible communication. Issuing from the mind and will of God, revelation is addressed to the mind and will of human beings. As such it involves primarily an activity of consciousness that enlists the thoughts and bares on the beliefs and actions of its recipients.  

Some who impugn a high view of propositional revelation as reflecting an outmoded modernist approach to theology, have confused the effects of God's revelation with its nature when they claim that revelation comes through the community of faith and the experience of Christians, as we will see below. God's revelation creates a community, whether the community of ancient Israel, the early church, or manifestations of the body of Christ around the world today. Revelation also produces relationships between believers and between believers and unbelievers. Revelation, when it is truly understood, likewise induces certain emotions such as reverence for God, joy over salvation, sorrow over sin, outrage over evil, and hope for the future restoration of the universe. But these communities, relationships, and emotions ought to be rooted in God's objective revelation, they do not constitute or comprise that revelation itself. Moreover, these responses would not be possible without God's prior revelation of objective truth. David's prayer of contrition and hope is uttered because God's revelation (through Nathan) convicted him of his sin, because he knew God would hear his prayer and because he knew God would forgive and restore him. Prayer (or community) without truth is pointless and pathetic.

When postmodernists seek to disparage meta-narratives, deconstruct truth into language games, and render spirituality as a mixture of subjectively compelling elements, evangelicals must bring objective truth back to the table as the centrepiece of concern. The issue is whether God speaks in ways we can understand. As Schaeffer said a generation ago, 'The whole question [for modern people] ... is whether there is anyone adequately there in the universe to speak'.  
Several evangelical thinkers have made, I believe, key mistakes with regard to the nature of truth and biblical revelation.

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6 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority, 3, 248. Henry's entire treatment of propositional revelation is excellent, and remains the best philosophical and theological treatment of the matter.
7 Ibid.
8 Francis A. Schaeffer, He is There. He is Not Silent (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), 54. Schaeffer was concerned with existentialism and language philosophy, but his point still stands for postmodernism.
that inadvertently let loose the contagion of truth-decay, thus 
threatening our ability to hear God speak in Scripture. I cannot treat 
their ideas thoroughly, but I will attempt to highlight what I take to 
be their essential confusions and errors.

**McGrath and Grenz on Propositional Revelation**

Making propositional revelation central is not an error of rationalism 
or modernism, as Alister McGrath alleges. McGrath, who sometimes 
carelessly quotes postmodernists to support his views (as we will 
see), claims that Carl Henry and others have 'laid too much 
emphasis upon the notion of a purely propositional biblical 
revelation'. He then caricatures this view: 'Any view of revelation 
which regards God's self-disclosure as the mere transmission of 
facts concerning God is seriously deficient, and risks making God 
an analogue of a corporate executive who disperses memoranda 
to underlings.'

Henry's sustained treatment of Scripture as propositional revelation 
bears little resemblance to McGrath's description. Henry recognises 
that God makes himself known (self-disclosure) through a variety 
of media. His insistent argument, which Christians must 
appropriate if we wish to reverse postmodernist truth-decay, is that 
God's revelation is irreducibly propositional, although this 
propositional truth comes to us in many forms and has many effects 
on us. Henry would agree with McGrath's statement that 'Revelation 
concerns the oracles of God, the acts of God, and the person and 
presence of God.' However, it must be the case that the oracle is a 
true oracle of God (as opposed to the counterfeits of the false 
prophets), that the act of God is rightly interpreted propositionally, 
and that the person and presence of God is cognitively apprehended 
as well as affectively felt.

Stanley Grenz agrees with McGrath's critique when he says that a 
'postmodern articulation of the gospel is post-rationalistic. It no 
longer focuses on propositions as the central content of Christian 
faith'. Grenz thinks that a personal encounter or experience of God 
articulated within the community of faith should characterise our 
witness, not a focus on propositional truth. At points, Grenz seems 
to give up or at least dilute the notion of propositional truth. At other 
points, he simply minimizes its relevance for postmodern situations. 
Grenz appeals to Polanyi's notion of 'universal intent' as exemplary 
for theology. We should distinguish a 'concern for universality with 
any claim about universality', since for Polanyi, 'truth always 
transcends our apprehension of it'. Grenz appears to endorse

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10 Ibid., 107.
11 Ibid.
12 Stanley Grenz. *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: 
13 Stanley Grenz. *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* 
   (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 78.
Polanyi’s idea that if ‘propositions themselves [express] final truth’ this ‘represents a truncated view of belief’. However, Grenz says that a ‘faith community claims to represent in some form the truth about the world and the divine reality.’ He also writes of the ‘propositions we accept as reflecting the nature of reality.’

This seems confused. ‘Propositions themselves’ either express truth or they do not. There is no middle option. For that matter, nothing but a proposition can express truth in a conceptual sense. (Truths can be manifested through divine actions, as we have pointed out; but these factual actions still bear witness to propositions.) No one proposition can express all the truth, but this hardly disqualifies a theological proposition from expressing certain and fundamental ‘final truths’. No human theology can lay claim to perfection, but certain statements are true in a definitive and final sense, such as ‘Jesus is Lord’, ‘God is triune’, ‘Humans are sinful’, ‘Jesus’ death atoned for human sin’, ‘There is a hell’, and so on. Confessing Christians are concerned both to ‘express universality’ and, therefore, make a ‘claim about’ universality. Jesus’ lordship covers every square inch of the universe (Acts 4:12; Col. 1:15-19; etc.). No human (or angel, for that matter) has a perfect or comprehensive grasp of what Jesus’ lordship entails, but this does not mean that we cannot utter ‘final’ or ‘universal’ truths about Jesus, his gospel, and his Kingdom.

Consider Jesus’ identity as God Incarnate. One can formulate this truth in various propositions, each with a greater level of conceptual sophistication. Consider:

- Jesus is truly divine and truly human.
- Jesus is one person with two natures: divine and human.
- Jesus’ two natures express a hypostatic union of divinity and humanity.

All three statements are objectively true because they correspond with the reality of Jesus Christ himself as God Incarnate. These propositions ‘themselves express final reality’, but they each do so with a different level of conceptual content and specification. None of these statements supplies the comprehensive truth of the Incarnation (nor does the Council of Chalcedon’s highly nuanced articulation), but they are all equally true and biblically congruent. These truths may serve as a foundation for further knowledge and clarification, but they succeed in their intent to be universally true. ‘Universal intent’, Grenz says to the contrary, is not sufficient for

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14 Ibid., 79.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 81.
theologising, although it is necessary. Our theological statements that intend to state universal propositions must succeed — that is, connect with objective reality, — in order to be true and biblical.

Grenz, following post-liberal theologian George Lindbeck, claims that theology and 'its propositions are second-order propositions', which derive from religious experience and communal life. Without assessing Lindbeck's controversial views in detail, Grenz's appropriation of Lindbeck is, nevertheless, troubling, because Lindbeck stresses that doctrine has a regulative function in various communities that is not directly (if at all) propositional. If so, doctrinal 'truths' only apply within the community; they cannot successfully or normatively refer to a reality outside of the community. Therefore, as Paul Griffiths point out, this view of doctrine (sometimes called 'rule theory'), rejects the idea that 'doctrine-expressing sentences primarily [are] expressive of propositions, and so bearers of truth-value and conveyers of information about extramental and extralinguistic realities.'

If the rule theory is correct, the doctrine of a Buddhist community and the doctrine of a Christian community cannot contradict each other, since they refer only to internal practices or rules of those respective communities, and not to objective truths expressed in propositions. But since both communities do lay claim to final realities outside of themselves, this cannot be the case. Consider two key doctrines: Nirvana (an impersonal state beyond desire) and the Trinity (a tri-personal being with desires) cannot both be the ultimate reality. One cannot find final refuge both in the Buddha and final refuge in the Christ. They are contradictory, antithetical. Such is the nature of all truth-claims, in religion and elsewhere. Truth-claims must exclude whatever contradicts them.

Therefore, Grenz's use of Lindbeck's concepts tends to undercut his own positive remarks about propositions. Theological propositions should have a first-order status in theology and all of life. Theology ought to be derived from Scripture, not community and experience, although these will always shape our theologies in various ways. Revealed truths, articulated theologically, ought to guide our lives, give us hope, and make us discerning, because their revealer is trustworthy and good. Theology rightly received does result in rules for godly living, but these rules are cognitively meaningful only in relation to objective realities that are true for everyone, both inside and outside the community of faith. For instance, John says to 'test the spirits to see whether or not they are of God.' This is done by checking their doctrine — the propositional affirmations — concerning Christ's identity (1 John 4:1-4). Paul speaks of 'the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness' (Titus 1:1). A deep knowledge of the objective truth leads to subjective godliness demonstrated

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17 Ibid., 77-78.
19 Ibid., 39-44.
without the Christian community and before the watching world. Francis Schaeffer is on target:

Our calling is not primarily to an alternate lifestyle. Considering what the Bible teaches, what is crucial is not the word community, nor the form the practice of community takes.

Our primary calling is to truth as it is rooted in God, his acts and revelation; and if it is indeed truth, it touches all of reality and all of life, including an adequate basis for, and some practice of, the reality of community.  

Henry has eloquently argued that God’s revelation is inherently, intrinsically, and incorrigibly cognitive; its intellectual content fuels our existential transformation as we submit to and internalise these truths, graciously made known to us by the Spirit of Truth (John 16:13). He highlights the first-order nature of divine revelation:

Revelation is actual only as God gives himself to our knowing. All a priori conceptions, all conjectural postulations, all subjective expectations are answerable to a subject to what is given through divine self-revelation. The objective given reality with which theology must begin is God manifesting himself in his Word.

The purpose of divine revelation is not merely the enunciation of a set of true propositions. Nevertheless, without these true propositions, revelation vanishes as a conceptual category, for there is nothing left to be revealed. There would be no cognitive content. Revelation is God’s activity to make himself known in ways that bear on every dimension of the human being – the mind, the emotion, and the will. The entire person must bow before one’s Creator and Redeemer in submission to the Holy Spirit. We are to love God with ‘all our hearts, soul, strength, and mind’ as of first priority; within that first-order theological context, we then love ‘our neighbour as ourselves’ (Matt. 22:37).

Logical Consistency and Theology

This whole-person submission to God, however, ought to stem from a logical understanding of what Scripture teaches and how it applies to us today. As God said through Isaiah, ‘Come let us reason together’, (Is. 1:18). Yet some have rejected logical consistency as a criteria for theology, taking it to be a holdover from the rationalism or Enlightenment modernism. McGrath accuses evangelical leaders such as Carl Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, Francis Schaeffer and Norman Geisler of succumbing to ‘a strongly rationalist spirit’ that is ill-advised. He criticises Henry by saying that ‘even Carl Henry can offer such hostages to fortune in his affirmation of belief in a “logically consistent divine revelation”’.  

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21 Carl F.H. Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority 3, 275.
22 McGrath, 170. He is quoting Carl Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority 3, 476.
makes it 'a more fundamental authority' than Scripture itself. McGrath asks, 'What logic is to be allowed this central role? Whose rationality provides the basis of scriptural authority?'

Henry and his followers, supposedly, do not recognise the effect of sin on human rationality. McGrath scolds them: 'Evangelicals, of all people, cannot allow revelation to be imprisoned within the flawed limits of sinful human reason.' He illustrates his worries by discussing how theologians have handled christological questions. He cites Tertullian, a fideist, as instructive, since he 'pointed out the danger of grounding or judging the gospel in what passed for human wisdom'. Henry has 'rendered evangelicalism intensely – and needlessly – vulnerable at this point', because of his insistence on logical consistency for the possibility of knowledge.

McGrath fails to make some crucial distinctions. First, in saying that logical consistency is a criterion for understanding Scripture, one is simply appealing to a basic fact of all intelligible discourse. We are made such that we cannot knowingly believe contradictory statements. But even if we could, they could not both be true! Jesus did not rise from the dead and fail to rise from the dead. As Henry tellingly says: 'If the law of contradiction is irrelevant in the sphere of transcendental ontology, then God and the non-God, the divine and the demonic, cannot be assuredly differentiated.'

Moreover, as Henry and others have developed at length, John's Gospel (1:1–3) refers to the pre-incarnate Christ as the Logos (or Word). This means, among other things, that the personal Word is intelligible and rational and created a knowable world peopled by creatures who can know truth. The Word is God communicating, God speaking. Henry powerfully articulates this: 'The Logos of the Bible is personal and self-revealed, transcendent to man and the world, eternal and essentially divine, intrinsically intelligible, and incarnate in Jesus Christ' as well as being 'the foundation of all meaning, and the transcendent personal source and support of the rational moral, and purposive order to created reality'.

Many early Christian apologists employed this notion to argue that any truth discovered by non-Christian philosophers was only possible because of God, the Logos. This doctrine is not an aberration of rationalism, but intrinsic to biblical revelation.

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23 McGrath, 170.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 171.
27 Ibid.
29 Henry, God, Revelation, and Authority 3, 194.
30 Ibid., 195.
31 Ibid., 164–247; and Ronald Nash. The Word of God, 59–70.
Dividing revelation asunder from logic generates a dangerous and false dichotomy. When McGrath asks, 'Which logic, whose rationality?' he befuddles matters, since no human owns or controls logic. Humans use logic, either poorly or wisely; humans do not create logic – although they may manipulate opinion, employ propaganda, and offer fallacious arguments. The basic laws of logic – such as non-contradiction and excluded middle – and essential argument forms – such as modus ponens and modus tollens – constitute proper thinking. These are not contingent social constructions that are revisable by anyone.

Moreover, McGrath himself appeals to logic in his own denigration of logic. This is inescapable, even if self-contradictory. He argues:

(1) Human reason is fallen.

(2) Logical tests for revelation play into the hands of secular critics.

(3) Therefore: Human reason should not be used to test revelation.

(4) Therefore: Those who use reason to test revelation are mistaken.

The problem is that: (1) is ambiguous and (2) is false. Therefore, (3) and (4) do not follow logically from (1) and (2). Let us see why.

Human reason-ing is affected by sin in that we often do not attend to matters logically at all or we reason only in a half-hearted or slothful way. We may employ logical fallacies without knowing it and/or the stock of facts from which we argue is sometimes limited in ways that hinder reaching sound conclusions. As Pascal mused:

_The mind of this supreme judge of the world is not so independent as to be impervious to whatever din may be going on near by. It does not take a cannon's roar to arrest this thought; the noise of a weathercock will do. Do not be surprised if his reasoning is not too sound at the moment, there is a fly buzzing in his ears; that is enough to render him incapable of giving good advice._


Scriptural revelation – deduce the existence and nature of the holy Trinity. However, I can discover the truth of the Trinity through divine revelation and rationally comprehend the basic framework of this doctrine as central to all of Scripture.34

Nonetheless, the problems with human reasoning count nothing against the validity of logic itself, which flows from the being of God and is intrinsic to our created nature and cognitive structure.35 There is more to being in the ‘image and likeness of God’ (Gen. 1:26) than being rational, but we are not less rational for that. Reason itself is not fallen. Reason is a fact of God’s reality – his character, the order of his creation, and the minds of his rational creatures. Human reason-ing, however, is subject to all manner of ills, because we are sinners who abuse God’s good gifts.

D. Elton Trueblood argued that revelation must be tested by reason ‘for the simple reason that there are false claims to revelation. We know, in advance, that many alleged revelations are false, because there are absolutely contradictory claims’. More pointedly: ‘Unless the law of contradiction is recognised as the necessary condition of all rational discussion, we give up everything’.36 If McGrath asks us to suspend basic logic for core Christian claims, why not suspend logic for non-Christian claims as well? For instance, Christians have deemed pantheism illogical. It claims first that everything is one and divine, and two, that individuals exist who typically don’t recognise this oneness and divinity. Rationality sees these pantheistic truth-claims as contradictory because a comprehensive divine oneness rules out real individuality and also the possibility of a lack of divine realisation (ignorance of the comprehensive deity).37 Yet if Christians defensively cloak themselves in mystery without invoking logic, they lose their ability to criticise other worldviews. Ironically, McGrath himself has written a book on Christian apologetics, which discredits other world-views as illogical and, therefore, unworthy of belief.38 Why, then, does he disparage reason with respect to propositional revelation?

The invocation of ‘mystery’ in describing Christian doctrine must be done with great care, and only after intense intellectual scrutiny. A logical contradiction is not a mystery; it is a falsehood and an absurdity, such as a square circle. Regarding the Incarnation, the appeal to logical consistency is not a modernist mistake that

34 For an excellent treatment of the Trinity, see Millard Erickson, God in Three Persons (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995).
35 Arthur Holmes has given an excellent account of how and why humans commit intellectual errors in All Truth is God’s Truth (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 49–69. However, Holmes does not concur with McGrath’s ideas on ‘fallen human reason’.
37 See Winfried Corduan, No Doubt About It (Nashville, TN: Broadman, Holman, 1997), 92–95.
38 Alister E. McGrath, Intellectuals Don’t Need God, and Other Myths (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).
exonerases Christian theology from secular appraisal. Beyond the basic framework spelled out by the Council of Chalcedon (which is faithful to Scripture), philosophers and theologians have tried in various ways to make the notion of one person with two natures intelligible and consistent. McGrath himself gives some helpful ways of explaining Christ’s deity and humanity in another book. Consider an analogy of a friend who holds dual citizenship. Although we typically think that one can only be a citizen of one country, this man is a citizen of both England and Switzerland. McGrath says:

A logical contradiction exists if, and only if, being British excludes being Swiss. But it does not. And why, at the theological level, should being human exclude Jesus from being divine. Might he not be a citizen of heaven as well as earth? 39

This is not a complete apologetic, but is intellectually suggestive, and appeals to the need for logical consistency for a statement to be true.

More philosophically, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest argue that the divinity and humanity of Christ do not contradict each other. To make the argument, they explain the difference between contraries and subcontraries. If two statements are contraries, they cannot both be true, but both can be false, such as: ‘All dogs are brown. No dogs are brown.’ If two statements are subcontraries, they can both be true, but cannot both be false, such as: ‘Some dogs are brown; some dogs are not brown.’

Within his one person, some of Jesus Christ’s attributes are divine and some are not divine (human). The truths about Jesus’ humanity are in a subcontrary relationship with the truths about his divinity. The divine attributes do not conflict with the human attributes, as would be the case if we said, ‘All of Christ’s attributes are divine and some of Christ’s attributes are not divine’. That would be a flat contradiction and therefore false, because ‘the affirmation and the denial of the universal truth claim could not be true’.

In contrast, in a subcontrary relationship neither the affirmation nor the denial is universal, hence both may be true. For example ... ‘Some of the attributes of a person are physical’ and ‘Some of the attributes of a person are nonphysical’. Similarly, ‘Some attributes of the person of Jesus Christ are divine and some are human’. Neither the divine set of attributes nor the human set of attributes is said to be all that he has, and so neither affirmation is necessarily false.40

The logical category of a subcontrary relationship comes from Aristotle (a pre-modern!), but serves theology well here. This is not modernistic rationalism, but rather faith seeking understanding through God-given logic. Lewis and Demarest admit their ‘lack of full comprehension’ of ‘how the divine and human attributes exist

39 Ibid., 126.
40 Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, Integrative Theology 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1992), 350.
together, but that is not sufficient ground attributing logical nonsense to the focal point of God's century-spanning redemptive programme! In understanding the Incarnation, they 'acknowledge complexity... but not contradiction'.

McGrath's attack on Henry's supposed rationalism - which would apply to Lewis and Demarest and many other evangelicals (myself included) - rings hollow for another reason. McGrath claims that insisting on logical consistency plays into the hands of critics, such as Spinoza, who view the Incarnation as a contradiction - as illogical as a square circle.

Yet why should evangelicals feel under any such pressure to conform to the highly questionable dictates of the limits of fallen human reason? And how often has it been pointed out, even by secular philosophers, that 'logic is the enemy of truth'?

This poisons the well by accusing Henry of conforming to 'fallen human reason', which we have already addressed. Moreover, no secular philosopher - pre-modern, modern or postmodern - will be persuaded by the Christian who says, 'We don't conform to fallen human reason, so we need not make the concept of the Incarnation intelligible to outsiders. Now that this is settled, please accept our theology and follow our God.' This would only give more fuel to the charge that Christianity is illogical and anti-intellectual.

As for the statement, 'logic is the enemy of truth', I know of no philosopher who ever held this. In fact, it would be difficult to even be a philosopher and hold this. McGrath gives no reference. If anyone holds this, it reveals his or her illogic and inability to discover truth. This slogan provides no help for Christian theology.

Sounding very postmodernist, McGrath asserts that 'the notion of universal rationality' is a fiction, a dream, and a delusion.' He is so concerned about the purported errors of the modernist attempt to establish a 'universal rationality,' that he enlists an epistemological nihilist, Paul Feyerabend, for his cause. Feyerabend says:

There is hardly any difference between the members of a primitive tribe who defend their laws because they are the laws of the gods ... and a rationalist who appeals to objective standards, except that the former know what they are doing while the latter does not.

Instead of attacking this radical constructivism, McGrath calmly adds, that 'this comparison has alarmed many; it has, however, yet to be refuted by a philosopher of science'. However, it is false that Feyerabend's philosophy of science has won the day academically or

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41 Ibid.
42 McGrath, A Passion, 171.
44 McGrath, A Passion, 90.
is impervious to cogent critique.\footnote{On the philosophy of science, see J.P. Moreland, \textit{Christianity and The Nature of Science} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989).} (His motto for describing the philosophy of science was ‘anything goes’. Would we want to apply that to theology?)\footnote{See Paul Feyerabend, ‘Anything Goes,’ in \textit{The Truth About the Truth}, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), 199–203. For a biographical and critical interaction with Feyerabend’s ideas, see John Horgan, \textit{The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge} in the \textit{Twilight of the Scientific Age} (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 47–56.}

Moreover, inasmuch as the tribespeople mistakenly attribute events to the gods instead of natural laws, they are flat-out mistaken. If they take the earth to be flat and the sun to move, they are mistaken as well. Many of their false beliefs keep them in the thrall of superstition. Primitive tribes have not found vaccines for polio or smallpox, nor can they reattach a detached retina, remove brain tumours, perform heart transplants, or send in paramedics by helicopter. These benefits are attributable to the advances of modern science (which originated within a Western, theistic world view), which has used rationality to discern many truths and cure many ills. One need not be a secular rationalist – who rejects divine revelation – to see this. McGrath throws the rational baby out with the rationalistic bath water.

In a critique of John Hick, McGrath also claims that ‘in these postmodern times ... the idea of a universal morality has been abandoned’.\footnote{Alister McGrath, in \textit{Four Views}, 67.} He also claims that ‘no universal moral framework exists by which such a public and universal judgement can be made’ about what religion is morally superior.\footnote{Ibid., 69.} McGrath is not merely being descriptive. He thinks that the move away from metanarratives and attempts to explain the big picture is healthy. Because ‘the old certainties of the Enlightenment’ – concerning universals such as experience, religion, and rationality – are dying, the ‘belief in cultural or experiential metanarratives ... is acknowledged to be at best flawed and at worst and invitation to oppression’.\footnote{Ibid., 200.} He is also happy that ‘claiming privileged access to a total and comprehensive knowledge of reality is generally treated with intense scepticism’ because it cannot be verified or falsified.\footnote{Ibid., 158.} McGrath quotes Terry Eagleton’s observations with approval:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Post-modernism signals the end of such ‘metanarratives’ whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a ‘universal’ human history. We are now in the process of awakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that heterogeneous range of}
\end{quote}
Although McGrath does not mention this, Eagleton's review was critical of postmodernism. However, Eagleton's description of postmodernism is apt; and it is not good news for Christian theology. The error of modernism was the construction of a false totality based on autonomous reasoning and humanistic utopianism that excluded divine revelation. The new error of postmodernism is the abandonment of metanarrative, the embracing of relativism, and the endorsement of cultural constructivism. In the very review McGrath cites, Eagleton himself worries that Jean Francois Lyotard's postmodernist rejection of metanarrative has no standpoint from which to condemn social injustice, such as Nazism, as objectively evil, since, according to Lyotard each narrative 'certifies itself in the pragmatics of its own transmission without having recourse to argumentation or proof.'

McGrath seems sanguine at the prospects of postmodernity but he fails to note that Christian theology is a metanarrative based on God's rational self-disclosure. The postmodernists on whom McGrath relies see the collapse of Enlightenment rationalism as the end of all metanarratives. If Christians cannot appeal to universal standards of rationality and morality in their apologetic and in their theological articulations, the postmodernist criticism of metanarratives ends up eroding the very Christianity we seek to present to the postmodern world. The very concept of divine revelation presupposes that those that receive that revelation do have 'some access to objective reality'. God has made himself known in creation, Christ, and the Scriptures. Followers of Christ have the privilege of knowing that Jesus is Lord; others do not (1 Cor. 8:6). Jesus' lordship covers all of reality, and all wisdom and knowledge is found in Christ (Col. 1:15-17; 2:3). We know only in part in this life (1 Cor. 13:12); but we do know, because we have been privileged with knowledge by God, the omniscient Revealer.

This privileged knowledge leaves no room for pride and has plenty of room for growth and correction, as I pointed out earlier. We do not equate the supreme truth of God with our limited grasp of it; but we do have something to grasp because God has grasped us in Christ by his matchless grace.

McGrath likewise joins postmodernists in dismissing the correspondence view of truth through a kind of caricature.

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51 Terry Eagleton, 'Awakening from Modernity,' Times Literary Supplement, 20 Feb. 1987, 195: quoted in McGrath, 187. Eagleton's article is a review of two books by Jean-Francois Lyotard, which defend postmodernism. Eagleton pans both books and the postmodernist project as a whole.

52 See Terry Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). This is a neo-Marxist critique.

53 Ibid., 194.
It is a travesty of the biblical idea of ‘truth’ to equate it with the Enlightenment notion of conceptual or propositional correspondence, or the derived view of evangelism as proclamation of the propositional correctness of Christian doctrine.\textsuperscript{54}

Strangely enough, McGrath also writes of evangelism as proclaiming 'an objective truth with the expectation that this will give rise to a subjective response – that is to say, a response which involves the heart, mind, and total being of those who hear it'.\textsuperscript{55} Truth cannot be objective unless it corresponds to objective reality. In another book, McGrath stipulates that faith must involve 'belief in the existence of God and his promises'.\textsuperscript{56} He is concerned about propositional proclamation without a call to commitment, but to say that the belief in the 'notion of conceptual or propositional correspondence' is a 'travesty' and a capitulation to Enlightenment notions is acutely errant. The truth makes demands on the totality of our being. It is truth disclosed by a personal God; this is not some abstract and impersonal Platonic notion of truth disconnected from the Supreme Being. But God's truth must be objective truth in order to make these all-encompassing demands on us, his creatures, subjectively. To limit theology, evangelism or apologetics to formulating and reciting a clinical list of propositional truths would be to truncate both disciplines, but to remove truth as correspondence would be to abolish theology, evangelism, and apologetics entirely.

The Enlightenment notion of truth was not new to the Enlightenment. The correspondence view of truth is ancient, going back to Plato, Aristotle and to the Bible itself. Both Christianity and many Enlightenment philosophers agree on the nature of truth; they disagree on what is true and what effect truth should have on us. McGrath, like many evangelicals flirting with postmodernism, fails to make these substantial distinctions.

There is a better way for Christian theology than making accommodations to postmodernist errors – the way of God’s knowable and gripping truth. We have a true story to tell.

**Back to God’s Metanarrative**

The grasp of God’s grace encompasses all of cosmic and human history in one grand narrative or story – a story we can apprehend truly, if only partially. Despite my disagreements with Grenz, he puts this point well:

> Our world is more than a collection of incompatible and competing local narratives. Contrary to the implications of Lyotard’s thesis, we firmly believe that the local narratives of the many human communities do fit together into a single grand

\textsuperscript{54} McGrath, *A Passion*, 177.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 178.

\textsuperscript{56} McGrath, *Intellectuals*, 49.
narrative, the story of humankind. There is a single metanarrative encompassing all people and all times.  

Postmodernists are correct in emphasising the centrality of stories in culture, from bedtime stories told to children to the narratives of nations and peoples. Their downfall comes in shrinking the narratives from the meta-narrative to the micro-narrative and severing these stories from objective truth. These mini-stories have been freeze-dried and shrink-wrapped for postmodern consumption, but they fail to nourish or satisfy or inspire – however much they may distract us from broader concerns.

We tell and hear stories to find meaning, not just for entertainment. They involve a place for human significance, plot and character development, characters, moral value, and resolution. More significantly, they require a storyteller – a narrator. Howard Synder explains:

You simply can’t have a story without a storyteller. A tale demands a teller as surely as tale and tell come from the same root. No teller, no tale. Without a novelist, no novel; without dramatist, no drama. This is obvious, yet its major meaning is often missed: A story requires a person as surely as lungs need air. The existence of a story is proof positive of the existence of a person. His means that story requires a consciousness, that strange fact of self-awareness, including will, intention, imagination, and purpose, the constituents of personality.  

Christian theology – whether articulated in seminary classes, Christian colleges, or preaching and teaching in the local church – ought to capitalise on the postmodernist fascination with narrative by speaking of God's own story in all its richness, complexity, and drama. It is a drama in four principle acts: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. But we must exhibit this narrative, not as just one among many micro-narratives that give meaning to disparate communities, but as the cosmic story of the Creator himself. This Creator who has not only given us the key to history in Scripture, but has entered history in the Incarnation for the sake of our liberation from sin and death. Hopelessly conflicting micro-narratives – 'You have your truth; I have mine' – give no final meaning to life; they set up ghettos instead of charting the terms, rights, gifts, and responsibilities of citizenship in God's world, of being actors in God's divine drama. God is the personal being who tells us the true story and orchestrates the whole story.

Christopher Jencks, a leading analyst of postmodernism in relation to architecture and the arts, discerns that postmodernism's rejection of meta-narratives places it at a cultural impasse. Thinking that traditional religions have nothing left to offer, he presents the outline of a 'new metanarrative', which strives rather desperately to

57 Grenz, Primer, 164.
anchor meaning in an aboriginal nothingness from which came chaos, from which evolved into order and increasing complexity.

In the beginning (one cannot expunge the biblical overtones) was the quantum vacuum, or plenum, the seething nothing that, because of the Uncertainty Principle, allows particles to come into go out of existence for short moments ... Whatever happened (according to the Standard Model) there was a hot explosion and expansion ...  

From this, Jencks pronounces about life coming from nonlife, purpose emerging from non-purpose, and eventually, culture springing forth from nature. This is the new 'universe story' – a tale told by no one, full of speculation and folly, signifying insignificance. The biblical overtones have been theologically expunged, but the psychological quest for a unifying and inspiring Story remains.

Jencks's author-less and meaning-less story reveals the prodigious and prodigal quest of postmodernism for some larger meaning beyond contingently constructed cultures. Nevertheless, capitalising 'Uncertainty Principle' and speaking of a 'seething nothing' is philosophically bankrupt. First, metaphysically, if all began with nothing, there would still be nothing because 'from nothing, nothing comes' (ex nihilo nihil fit, as the ancients said). Nothing, which has no properties whatsoever, by definition and necessity has no causal properties or powers. We know, as John Locke said, 'by intuitive certainty, that bare nothing can no more produce any reality, than it can be equal to two right angles'. Therefore, it is ontologically paralysed, inert, and incapacitated. Invoking exotic terms from physics does nothing to solve the problem of the nullity and uselessness of nothingness.

Second: in speaking of the 'quantum vacuum or plenum or seething nothing,' Jencks flatly contradicts himself, since a vacuum (quantum or otherwise) is just the opposite of a plenum which means a fullness of something. Using these two antithetical concepts interchangeably makes no sense. Fullness cannot be the same thing as nothingness. Placing the exciting adjective 'seething' before the barren noun 'nothingness' is likewise unable to make nothing into something since there is no existing object available for the attribute 'seething' to attach itself. And 'seething nothingness' is just as incapable of bringing anything into being as just plain nothing.

Third: even if we grant (per impossible) that nothing produced everything without a cause or reason, nothing subsequent would have any reason for its existence. History – whether cosmic or human

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51 I am here playing on Shakespeare's famous phrase, 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'
52 Ibid.
or subhuman – would utterly lack any meaning, purpose, value, or significance because its foundation would literally be in nothing. This is hardly a metanarrative fit to inspire beleaguered and confused postmoderns. We are simply thrown back to social constructions, contingencies, and chaos – the very things Jencks wants to transcend. His impersonal and arbitrary universe leaves persons adrift and rudderless.

If Christian theology is to hold its ground and advance in confronting the challenges of postmodernism, it must clearly and powerfully affirm the propositional truth of God-inspired Scripture and its rational know-ability. It must recognise and heed the demands and privileges of God’s great cosmic story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Nothing less will meet the need of our postmodern hour.

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