

**A Resource Paper for the
Assembly of Confessing Congregations**

**Word and Spirit:
Authority and Interpretation
in a Postmodern World**

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It has become a truism to say that two issues above all others define the postmodern condition: its attitude to meaning and its settled incredulity towards metanarratives.

Rehashing the history of how we've come to be where we are is too big a task for us, and you'll no doubt be familiar with much of it. But we face a situation which raises fundamental questions. Can we preach the gospel with authority in a postmodern world? What are the marks of gospel authority? Do we need more of the Word or more of the Spirit? Or both? Or neither? Can we not approach the mission of the church as we would any other organization? Is restructuring and better planning the answer? Or are we merely flogging a dead horse?

Postmodernism: Is There a Meaning in Any Text?

Postmodernity and meaning have had a difficult relationship. They met in a crisis, and they've been trying to resolve their issues ever since. Neither of them has attained closure.

With the Enlightenment and Modern projects left in the smoking ruins of revolution, war and holocaust, each was in need of a new partner, but instead of returning to their roots they struck out in a new direction. Cain-like, they've been wanderers in the land of Nod for the last sixty years or more. Like popular spirituality, in which all rivers magically lead to the same ocean (watersheds notwithstanding), the postmodern difficulty with meaning has many tributaries. You'll be familiar with some, for example:

Jacques Derrida and the deconstructionist school stressed language as a cultural construct. Being a function of culture, language will always be captive by culture. Because meaning is intrinsically culturally conditioned, "certainty" and "meaning" are mutually exclusive terms. We need to get used to the fact that cultural constructions of language are infinitely variable. Hermeneutically we've been asking the wrong questions. Paul was a product of his time, and his language was the

product of his culture and its antecedents, so the exegetical question "What did Paul mean when he said x, y or z" is a *non sequitur*. Paul couldn't possibly know what his cultural constructs were. Our deconstruction expresses but a new cultural construction, to be deconstructed by another time and culture.

Richard Rorty expounded the view that meaning must always remain contingent, never objective; not because of culture, but because of where meaning is generated. Precisely because it's a socio-linguistic phenomenon of the mind, meaning must always remain provisional; one for one correspondence between the inner meaning of a sentence (constructed in the mind), and an external reality (perceived in the mind) is impossible. For Rorty, language and meaning must be viewed pragmatically—not least because where they've been linked with ideological certainty they've become oppressive. For him, the Enlightenment project fell at the first hurdle; it believed in the idea of an objective reality to which rational thought corresponds. It didn't realize that external, object truth was a category error of the first order. Rather than demythologizing the world by human reason alone (as in the Enlightenment), a sort of pragmatic pluralism now serves as our (somewhat blunt) Occam's razor. Meaning must aid the advancement of liberty and undermine oppression. Pragmatism provides the parameters by which we can construct a non-oppressive worldview.

Roland Barthes has told us that supremacy lies with the reader. Old semiotic models were clearly inadequate to explain the complex phenomenon that communication is. Much of a novel's power comes from the imagination of the reader, far more than the pen sketch of any character's features or actions given by the author. Indeed, the secret of good authorship is to engage the imagination, rather than to prescribe its vision. The rise of the reader has led to death of the Author (Barthes' capital). Once a work has left the Author's hand he or she has no control over it, nor should we expect it otherwise. Reader response trumps Authorial intent like a royal flush to a pair of twos; the reader holds all the

cards. As with beauty, meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

Yet the realms of linguistics, literary criticism and philosophy haven't been the only challengers to old certainties. Science, especially through the mysterious and very un-Newtonian worlds of quantum physics and cosmology, is no longer the black and white realm it once was.

In addition, the post-WWII generations have experienced a cavalcade of change. Technology; economic prosperity; sociological and demographic shifts; disillusionment with the old institutions; the turn to the east for spiritual enlightenment (just try to find a garden centre that *doesn't* sell plastic Buddhas!); the hidden persuaders of advertising and marketing; and the rise of the humanistic sciences have spawned a world barely recognisable to our forebears. Consumer driven economies rest on a plinth of humanistic psychologies and sophisticated marketing. We've forged a world with the "reader" at the very centre of all things, even the ability to construct his or her own identity. Indeed, to do so is to choose empowerment over cultural oppression. To say otherwise is clearly inappropriate. It may even be unacceptable.

We've sat at least three generations atop such creations, as on so many brightly painted merry-go-round horses. The youngsters have squealed with delight at the ups and downs of the ride, but the music, lights and mirrors are a distraction against the dank air of gathering night. They're getting sick from the ride—to the point of death—and there's some evidence to suggest the mechanism has sand in its gears. Will it throw all the riders off in a bruising tumble? Or grind to a noisy halt, allowing the disillusioned jockeys to wander off, looking for something more substantial? Pastorally I bet you're encountering both. Regularly.

Now, lest I be accused of being simply a Naysayer we must say "Yea!" to some things. Language, unarticulated cultural assumptions and shared cultural constructs are demonstrably intertwined, and readers—

not only of the written word, but of the visual arts, film, performance and oral communication—don't always share the meanings of the authors. This is why book clubs, literary critics and minute takes at church council meetings all experience conflict about their "readings" of certain texts.

In addition, we have to face the fact that ideologically based meaning systems have often been brutally oppressive. Meanings imposed by the mandarins of control have often allowed for no other reading—just ask Jan Hus, William Tyndale, or Martin Luther when you meet them.

But there is also a supreme irony in all this. Large and hotly defended volumes are written to explain it all. Literary theorists, linguists and literary critics demand to be heard and understood! They'll defend their reputations to the hilt, so say "No, I did not mean 'x', but I did mean 'y'. Even if I mean that meaning is meaningless, I want you to understand what I mean!"

I Mean What I Say, But I Don't Say What I Mean!

Other lines of critique lie closer to hand. You don't have to be a philosopher to appreciate the importance of preaching in any form. Everyone has a gospel of some sort. We've just come through many mind-numbing weeks of electioneering in which Australians have been preached at daily. As the church looks to the world for its power, comparisons between political sloganeering, business mission statements, corporate strategic plans and church vision documents reveal some unnerving similarities. But can we really package the gospel like the City packages *its* evangelism? Is our view of the Word and Spirit so hobbled that we've subjected the church to mechanistic cause and effect analytics? Have we become practical deists, operating under the pretence of Trinitarian orthodoxy?

In the media, weasel words, spin, and the endless chase to get a politician to answer a question are but the negative symptoms of an

assumed truth: words are powerful. So powerful that we want to be in control of their meaning; we certainly don't want words put into our mouth by anyone else, least of all an opponent. Losing control of the narrative is a mortal sin.

The struggle for definition is veritably the struggle for life itself. In the typical Western two men fight desperately for the possession of a gun that has been thrown to the ground: whoever reaches the weapon first shoots and lives; his adversary is shot and dies. In ordinary life, the struggle is not for guns but for words; whoever first defines the situation is the victor; his adversary, the victim. For example, in the family, husband and wife, mother and child do not get along; who defines whom as troublesome or mentally sick?... [the one] who first seizes the word imposes reality on the other; [the one] who defines thus dominates and lives; and [the one] who is defined is subjugated and may be killed.*

We recognize the power of words to define the ground and delineate the winning narrative. One is a "climate change denier", "homophobe", "misogynist", "fundamentalist", or "liberal". The list is endless, but with one constant feature: the emotive power of the label displaces dialogue. It condemns rather than engages.

The highly spun nature of political conversation on the one side, and the propensity to run to emotively laden labels on the other, point to the issue—we expect communication to communicate something. The modern triumph of style over substance has its limits. At core we still recognise that words, their meanings, interpretation and power belong together. Do you get what I mean?

* Thomas Szasz, *The Second Sin* (New York: w, 1974), 25.

Does the Story Have a Happy Ending?

Yet, even if we recognise that there's a meaning in every text, we're still faced with a problem. The dilemma of contemporary society may be put like this: meaning may be uncertain, but certainty is oppressive.

This is the mantra of the other facet of the postmodern condition—the incredulity towards metanarratives. While it has been fed by a distrust of language as the agent of oppression, its scepticism also has another source.

As you would be aware, a metanarrative is a big story, which seeks to explain other stories. This explanatory function is its power. A metanarrative is an overarching worldview, by which all other worldviews are examined and found wanting, or plundered to advance the dominant view. Christendom, Islam, Marxism, Nazism, Capitalism...the list of metanarratives is as endless as the shape of human thought. And the disillusionment when they fail is the stuff of revolutions and genocide.

Metanarratives are in the discard pile for a number of reasons. First, there are just too many of them! They overtake one another like the runners at Royal Ascot, with empires riding on the outcome. Warfare between metanarratives—literal or ideological—is the story of history. But, second, when the dust has settled and the dead are buried, the result is the same: each has failed to deliver on its promises. Notwithstanding different starting points, every train terminates at Dystopia Central. Why? Because, third, metanarratives are intrinsically oppressive. Being ideologically driven rather than pragmatic they're inimical to human freedom. Like the City in Revelation, their ships use human souls for ballast. So, fourth, their claims for truth and universality are self-evidently wrong.

Which is why we now stand at the roadside like the boy in the story, calling the Emperor's New Clothes for what they really are. Yet unlike him, we're too cynical to be prophetic, and not meek enough to see that *we're* the ones whose nakedness is exposed.

So, where do you go when you're in a big city without a GPS? Clearly, relativism is the answer! Any path is a good path provided it's not hurting anyone. Rejecting the very concept "metanarrative" is better than holding to an oppressive one. Except, this becomes its own metanarrative! And it operates its own Inquisition—the totalitarianism of tolerance—which flexes its muscle daily in the media and increasingly in our courts.

In the end, opposites meet. Pre-Christian, pre modern society bears a startling resemblance to post-Christian, post-modern society. The totalitarianism of Rome isn't too dissimilar to the totalitarianism of tolerance that confronts us. In their pluralism, the Emperor Cult became the overarching unifier. Allegiance to it was the litmus test of patriotism. We worship at an oxymoronic shrine: Absolute Relativism. And pragmatism drives us all.

Pontius Pilate: A Very Ancient Model of a Postmodern Governor

In the light of all this, Pilate's question, "What is truth?" sounds surprisingly contemporary. His Greco-Roman pragmatism had no more tolerance for the Truth than ours. Like us, he subjugated even his own conscience to the political, economic and philosophic demands of the hour.

The irony, not lost on the initial readers of John's gospel, was that the Truth stood in front of him. Pilate—born of the flesh but not of the Spirit—couldn't recognize him; but unlike Nicodemus, he didn't linger to find out. His political agenda was too important; he stumbled over the Stumbling Stone.

The Stone of Stumbling and Rock of Offence has a face and a name. It's not just that we didn't like Jesus' philosophy, we despised *him*. Surely, the Lord of heaven must be clothed with enormous might; the cosmic truth must be elegant; kingship must be regal; sovereignty

must have the clout to compel submission; and leadership must be Machiavellian. Humility, especially in the Greco-Roman world, wasn't virtuous. Little wonder Pilate was perplexed by this bedraggled man before him.

Yet the glory (and the revelation) lies in the hiddenness. Jesus is eternal the Truth of God, expressed in a person, not in a philosophical proposition. God so loved the world he gave us his *Son*—the Way to God, the Truth of God and the Life of God in human flesh. God imparted *himself* to us, in the Word, born of the Spirit through the womb of Mary. The Bible, and all the doctrines that arise from it, don't save us. The man under the crown of thorns was God; the man crucified between two thieves was God; and the man interceding for us now in heaven is God. He is the Truth, to which we simply point, John-the-Baptist-like, in the midst of our generation, as we preach Jesus in all the Scriptures.

But there's more. We don't worship a dead hero. Through the Incarnate Word, by whom the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, God *continues* to impart himself to us. He does so through the means of grace. There is no other truth than that the truth as it is in Jesus, and as he comes to us in the word and sacraments he keeps renewing us in the spirit of our minds, cupping our face in his hands to look at his, turning us away from the idols which blind us. He washes our ears with the water of the Spirit, bends down to feed us with Bread of Heaven and carries us in his Son's arms as our Shepherd. We know him in his actions, of which we are the blessed beneficiaries. He speaks. Jesus' words to dead and decaying Lazarus are but the speech-act prefiguring his subsequent post-ascension ministry. The voice of the Lord of Life still raises the dead, so that a resurrected humanity might share in his glory.

As the Truth of God, Jesus is the only faithful and true witness in the cosmos. God is his own true witness. The idols bear false witness to

God, in a hostile courtroom. The accuser stands ready, filling the world with adversarial chatter and slandering the Creator with every sulphurous breath. Aligned with him and captive in sin, we cannot bear true witness to God or to our own situation. Professing to be wise, we've become fools. God alone is true, while all men and women are liars.

In a universe of deceitful and corrupt witnesses, Christ alone is the faithful and true witness to his Father. Whereas God's chosen servants, Israel and the Church, are partial and faulty witnesses, the True Israel and the Chosen One bears full and faultless testimony. He speaks to us and to the world, communicating solely what he has heard from his Father. So if his gospel is to be preached, *he* must preach it—and though he does so with the language and accents of countless heralds, *his* sheep hear *his* voice. This is a constant miracle. In the gospel, Christ declares and prolongs his present grace to each generation, as a *preached* word. The aural nature of it is irreducible, and our silence in preaching inexcusable.

In the Bible, the Author is not dead, Truth isn't a category error and the gospel is not subject to spin of any sort. We are not self-defining creatures and we can't reshape the world to our own will. That way, madness lies. We are owned. The proclamation of the gospel is the means by which that ownership is affirmed, and the usurper's claims denied. Little wonder it is hotly contested.

Authority: Word and Spirit in Inseparable Union

The sands of postmodern relativism have been encroaching against the parapets for a long time. Where the church hasn't succumbed in an act of total cultural capitulation it has fled for refuge to bastions of certainty. These have trended along two lines: the philosophical and the phenomenological. Each serves as an apologetic, but neither fully satisfies—we still hear the wind whistling through the palisade.

For example, on the one hand authority has become vested in the text itself. In reaction to classical liberalism's denuding the Scriptures

of Divine authorship we've sought certainty in doctrines connected to the text on the page. These have also served to define the parameters of evangelicalism—theological blood has been spilled over words such as inerrancy, infallibility, verbal and plenary inspiration. At its worst, different types of biblical literature (poetry, narrative, prophetic oracle, apocalyptic, hortatory, etc.) have been trimmed to fit literalism's Procrustean bed. Or, we have placed excessive faith in evidential apologetics, as though the reluctance for people to believe in Jesus is primarily a rational one. Mustering enough logic, with enough force, to counteract the critique of secularism, makes us feel more secure.

At the other extreme authority has been vested in subjective experience. The direct and constant experience of the miraculous serves as a means of experiential proof texting. But when the signs cease and the adrenalin levels drop to normal, the church becomes depressed.

Something in all this reverberates with Paul's words about Jews seeking for signs and Greeks searching for wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22), all the while ignoring the Sign of Jonah and the Wisdom from above.

Christianity has never failed to recognise the interdependence of Word and Spirit. Historic formulations of the doctrine of Holy Scripture were always forged with reference to the Spirit, who not only inspired the human authors, but also continues his work by enlightening the readers. The Author (no apology to Barthes) of Scripture is present on both sides of the equation. Only in this way is the Bible self-authenticating. To those who have the Spirit, the Word speaks, but apart from that the remains dead letter.

The doctrine of Scripture is but an analogy of the organic union between Word and Spirit. In the Incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Word and Spirit are inseparable in their operations. While they're distinct they're never disparate, a point

that had to be hotly defended during the Reformation on more than one front. We neglect that fact at our peril.

What's of critical importance is that the gospel can only be preached in Word-Spirit unity. This is so, not simply because of the gospel's origins (Who is the subject of the proclamation) but its effects (what God accomplishes in the gospel). What God does in the gospel he can do in no other way.

God's Authoritative Metanarrative

With no king in Israel each person did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6). In a world full of mini-narratives (my personal, self-constructed reality) in which pragmatism holds the floor we find ourselves in familiar territory. The prophets were God's pastoral response, since through their ministry God rooted all the mini-narratives of Israel (including its idolatry) in the metanarrative of his salvation-history.

On a pastoral level we are called to serve as interpretive guides for wanderers in the land of Nod; as they've been thrown off the merry-go-round we're given the healing gifts of Word and Spirit (especially in the gospel, preached both aurally and in the sacraments) to bind up the broken hearted. But the Word is also the Light of the world, and the darkness cannot overcome it. It shows a path the world cannot see. The Lamp of Israel (i.e. the Messiah-King) is the light unto our feet.

The apostolic calling is that of the gospel alone—Paul, for example, knew his authority lay not in his office or his person, but in his gospel (Galatians 1:8). We're called to participate in that same apostolic ministry, "...to open their eyes so that they can turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, and receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are made holy by faith in me." (Act 26:18, ceb) God's metanarrative dispels the darkness and our pastoral ministry is both prophetic and apostolic to the degree it is gospel centred.

Just as in the first century, the twenty first century needs more gospel not less. Through the apostolic preaching of the cross, God's salvific metanarrative revealed the King, not just in Israel but for the nations. His claims of Lordship—preached by a little flock of no worldly power and having no institutional status—overthrew kingdoms, recast cultures,

and created a new community. Everything the apostles said was counter-intuitive and every manifestation of the Spirit's life counter-cultural. The gospel re-shaped the whole world. Do we believe that this is still the case? Or have our hope and expectancy sunk to such low levels that we've become mere functionaries in our office, more cynical than prophetic? Have we lost hope in the gospel, and have we turned to something else that "works" more effectively? Perhaps the bludgeoning force of church politics has reduced gospel confidence to feeble vestiges of courage? Do we despise our weakness— either in our propensity to despair or our proclivity to run to quick fix solutions—and thereby deny God's power?

The apostolic preaching of the cross was (and is) God's declaration to the world of his metanarrative. Through it, he defines us, human history and the cosmos by revealing himself. This revelation is transformative encounter, which comes with certain markers of its authority. Let me suggest six:

FIRST, it is counter-intuitive. It denies what the Flesh affirms and affirms what the Flesh denies. It is not faithless reason, nor unreasoning faith, but faith-transformed reason. Of itself, human reason stands as much in need of redemption as the rest of our faculties. Mind, emotion, will, conscience, and the body all need a resurrection. Only the Spirit can do this, through the Word. Until such happens, the gospel remains foolishness. Even in the regenerate the battle is strong, which is why the church always needs the means of grace, *in their fullness*.

SECOND, it is counter-cultural. The culture of the gospel is that of the Trinity. Its citizenship is in heaven and the City of God is its homeland. The gospel alone allows the fruit of the Divine life to be expressed in human society. How? Through participation in the Persons of the Godhead. By contrast, the dominant culture will *always* be informed by Babylon (in the theological sense)—the expression of the unholy trinity of the dragon, beast and false prophet. For this reason all cultures will manifest hostility to the gospel, to a greater or lesser degree. As at Antioch or Ephesus, the grace of God is seen in the cultural melt-down that takes place as the gospel puts to death that which doesn't belong to the Triune life and raises up that which does.

THIRD, it is of the Spirit, not the Flesh. *Sarx* and *pneuma* represent two completely different worlds. The Flesh is not the body, any more than the Spirit is to be reduced to the soul. The Flesh loves religion, spirituality, the law and righteousness; just ask Saul the Pharisee. Never let the Flesh seduce you into thinking dissipation is its worst work. Its most deadly effort is striving for righteousness. By contrast, only the Spirit can produce his fruit. The Flesh, straining to produce an approximation of them, ends up in the opposite extreme. Only the gospel can at one and the same time denude the Flesh of its power and reproduce the Spirit's life in the believing community; which is why Galatians is such an important letter for our day.

FOURTH, the gospel alone secures us in the hope of God. Hope and Promise, Word and Spirit—these are continually alive connections in the pastoral ministry of the apostles. Covert deism and simple pragmatism steal hope from the church and replace it with a counterfeit gem. Only the gospel will allow us to seek a city whose maker and builder is God, to count but loss all that the Flesh strives to gain, and to know who our true treasure is. In many senses the church is in a crisis of hope. We cannot allow it to be turned back onto its own resources to save itself.

FIFTH, the message of the cross—so foolish in the worlds' eyes—must again become the pole star of our preaching. The cross is not elegant, powerful, compelling, or sophisticated. It's a bloody mess. The pressure to be ashamed of Christ and him crucified is as strong now as ever, and for this reason the apologetic of our good deeds (which our works of mercy have largely become) risks demagnetising our compass. Eventually we may be nothing more than a series of service organizations having no connection to our *raison d'être*. Let us preach Christ in all the Scriptures without shame or fear. Our apostolic authority rests on his gospel alone.

SIXTH, it takes seriously the *solae* of the Reformation: *sola Scriptura*; *sola gratia*; *sola fide*; *solo Christo*; and *sola Deo gloria*. By Scripture alone; by grace alone; by faith alone; through Christ alone; glory to God alone. These are mutually interdependent and mutually interpretive. In every instance, the *alone* bit is critical. No one at the time of the Reformation rejected the need for faith, the prominence of grace, the importance of the Bible, or the significance of Christ. But let the *alone* ring out, and you'll discover where faith is really placed. The *solae* form the cutting edge of apostolic gospel proclamation.

In view of all these things may I make some simple suggestions for pastoral ministry today? Preach the whole counsel of God in the Scriptures i.e. traverse the range of biblical literature, deal with each according to its genre, and immerse ourselves and our congregations in the grand themes of the biblical narrative. Be convinced of the value of proclamation, teaching and instruction and seek every opportunity for these to occur. Devote ourselves to addressing problems of biblical illiteracy and the dumbing down of worship, so that we don't keep reducing our content to the lowest common denominator. Act as interpretive guides for the wayfaring strangers in whom the Lord's Spirit is already at work. Rejoice in your weakness, and thank God he keeps raking the sandboxes we like to play in. Play better music than the fairground. Ride real horses. And let the Light shine in the darkness.



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