

Exegesis *Pro Rege in Communion:*

—A REPLY BY BRIAN WALSH

It was a wonderful honor to come to Dordt College last September to deliver the annual Staley Lectures. The rich reformational tradition of Dordt, combined with the academic rigor that characterizes this institution's educational ministry, made this a good site to try out some new ideas around the interpretation of Scripture in a postmodern context. And while the hospitality and interaction with faculty and students was most gratifying, I confess that the session in which four members of the Dordt community responded to my second lecture was deeply moving. Not only is it quite an act of personal and academic generosity for four people to read my work so closely, but it is also a deeply humbling experience to have people take you so seriously that they consider what the implications might be of one's ideas for their own lives and communities. So I begin my response to these four colleagues by expressing again my thanks to them and to the Dordt community for this generous hospitality.

There are many issues raised in these responses that could not possibly be dealt with in the short compass of this article. John Van Rys's questions are especially expansive. Is there any significance to the change in title from "or" to "and"? Well, not as far as the author knows, but then authors are not always the final interpreter's of their own work. So I invite Van Rys to keep playing with that one. Or perhaps I should take on Van Rys's more manageable little question, "In the end, what are the hermeneutical principles and practice we should

embrace as Christians?" Why don't we wait until "the end" for that one—and I mean neither the end of this article, nor the end of my writing career!

Perhaps three issues can occupy us here. First, I would like to clarify why I engage in this kind of engagement between postmodernity and the biblical text at all. Second, I will make some further comments about worldviews and their relation to ideologies. And finally, I will conclude with some reflection on truth, new situations, and the praxis of the Christian community.

I. Why take Foucault so seriously?

This is a question that Mark Tazelaar raises in his response. Have I granted postmodernity in general and Foucault in particular too much? This is an important question. Tazelaar discerns that I have been "deeply challenged" by Foucauldian strategies of interpretation, and therefore I attempt to engage them seriously. Actually, this conclusion is only half true. In my paper, I take very seriously the possible implications of Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth" for both our understanding of worldviews and for our reading of Scripture. You might recall, however, that I conclude that biblical scholars who actually engage in "Foucauldian exegesis" are actually facile in their approach to the text. Frankly, they don't challenge me, they bore me.

Foucault, however, is a different story. While I certainly make no claims to being an expert on the

work of Michel Foucault, there is something about his work, specifically his connection of truth claims to power grabs, that strikes a chord in the present generation of students. A common theme amongst many of the students whom I meet is that truth claims are simply a matter of one ideology trying to have cultural dominance over another. And it is for such people that I engage in this kind of exegesis. Where the church has for too long imposed its orthodoxy as an unchallenged absolute, the Scriptures have become a closed book. I want to help people open this book again and to meet there an alternative understanding of truth—one that is proven not by power over power, but through sacrificial love manifest on a cross.

II. The Problem with Worldviews

All four of my respondents picked up on the problematizing of worldview discourse in my article. Robert Drenten provocatively claimed that “worldviews as constructs of faith build considerable fortresses against the claims of Christ.” Emily Hutton’s moving response worries that worldview language becomes reduced to the indoctrinated jargon of an exclusive ideology. John Van Rys asks me to elaborate on my understanding of worldview over against the position of Walter Wilson that I have criticized, and Mark Tazelaar suggests that perhaps the rhetorical tradition may “actually open possibilities for *more diversity* within a worldview, *as it is and can be lived-through*, than we previously suspected.”

These are important questions, especially for a tradition that has been so deeply rooted in worldview discourse, and also for a person who has made much of his academic career around the idea of worldviews. First, let me make one point of clarification. I suspect that none of my respondents had ever read Walter Wilson’s book *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians*.¹ And my article may well have left a more negative impression of this book than I had intended. Simply stated, this is a wonderfully creative interpretation of Colossians against the backdrop of paraenetic practices in the ancient world. It is, indeed, a worldview approach to exegesis that I find very fruitful and exciting. Moreover, his understanding of worldviews is

indebted to the reformational tradition and is, therefore, very close to my own. That connection explains why his book serves as such a good foil for the kind of Foucauldian problematizing of worldviews that I embark upon in my article. I could have just as easily used *The Transforming Vision, Creation Regained, or Roots of Western Culture* to the same ends, except that none of these books are explicitly interpreting Colossians.² Problematizing Wilson’s understanding of worldview means problematizing my own.

While Tazelaar is undoubtedly right in saying that we must resist the postmodern sentiment that rhetoric—and by extension, worldview—is always a matter of ideological power grabbing, the comments by Drenten and Hutton suggest that we do, in fact, recognize the truth of the Foucauldian critique. A community’s worldview *can* and often *does* easily become an exclusive, indoctrinating, and marginalizing ideology. And this has happened in our midst.

Now it seems to me that there are five ways in which a biblically rooted, transformational—even reformational!—worldview can succumb to ideology. And these five ways just happen to produce an interesting acronym that some of you might recognize, namely, TULIP. Only here, TULIP has no direct reference to the five points of Calvinism as encoded by the Synod of Dordt, but refers to the five components of a worldview turned ideology. In summary, worldviews have turned into ideologies when they become:

Total Systems of

Unconditional Finality that have

Lost their Biblical Dynamism, thereby becoming

Irrelevant or Inconsequential to changing

cultural contexts, because they are
preoccupied with the

Protective Ethos of an enclosed community.

Unfortunately, there is no space to unpack this in further detail, but perhaps you get the picture. When a worldview takes on these kinds of characteristics, then an ideology has been born.

What then is the alternative? Well, in terms that are much too brief, I would suggest that a biblically dynamic worldview is characterized by **hospitality** rather than exclusion – it is formative of a community that shares table fellowship with sinners and is the direct opposite of a fearful protec-

tionism. Such a worldview is driven by a **passionate and prophetic imagination** that has the courage and creativity to be subversively relevant to the educational and cultural ideologies of our time. But such imagination is funded by a continually **dynamic engagement with Scripture**. And this must be an engagement that allows our reading of Scripture to be full of questions and to be patient enough not to demand answers too quickly. The Bible-as-an-easy-answer-book-of-theological-orthodoxy, or quick-manual-of-moral-absolutes, or compendium-of-timeless-truths is, I suggest, the first step to ideology and a lost biblical dynamism. What I am talking about is an indwelling of the biblical narrative in such a way that this story, with all of its tensions, plot confusions and dead-ends, and in all of its historical oddities, is, nonetheless, our story.³

For the biblical narrative to be *our story*, however, requires historically sensitive, culturally attuned interpretation. We need to acknowledge, therefore, that worldviews, and the interpretations on which they are based, are not handed down, complete from heaven. Rather, **worldviews are, in fact, constructed in community and in history**.

Finally, I suggested that worldviews become ideologies when they are taken to be total systems. A biblical worldview, however, is not a system at all—it is a dynamic story. A biblical worldview is a **storied vision of and for life**. Harry Fernhout has wisely argued that story is the matrix of worldview and “that if a story is to remain vibrant and formative, there must be a community of people capable of remembering and reinterpreting that story” in such a way that the community is “capable of ordering their new experience in a manner consistent with their story.”⁴ But there is the rub. A storied vision of and for life, a narratively-formed worldview, can only remain vital if that story is adaptable to changing historical conditions. The story requires fresh reinterpretation if it is not to become a dead tradition.

III. Truth, Newness, Community, and Praxis

The kind of reinterpretation that Fernhout envisions is what I endeavored to do in my Staley lectures at Dordt College and this raises questions of truth and newness. Tazelaar insists that “Scripture

doesn’t have a *radically new message* constructed for each supposed *radically new age*.” Well, I’m not so sure. It seems to me that the gospel comes to us as both a *gift* and a *call*.⁵ The word of truth (Col. 1.6) “comes” to us as wonderful gift that entails a call to a radical, praxis-oriented interpretation that is faithful to the gift precisely by giving it “voice and force in changed circumstances.”⁶ Such interpretations are, of course, constructions—faithful constructions, we hope, but constructions nonetheless.

I concluded my paper by saying that a worldview is only as good as the praxis or way of life

*The Scriptures offer an
alternative understanding
of truth— one proven not
by power over power,
but through sacrificial love.*

that it engenders. Of course, all of this has to do with community. The text that is foundational to our faith is exegeted in a community of interpretation that is in dynamic relation to a tradition of interpretation. Our exegesis is always *pro Rege in communione* (for the King in community). The “fruit” (1.6,10) of that interpretation is borne in the life of the community that is formed by the story of Jesus. It is the life of the community that will render this story, this worldview, these kinds of interpretations, either plausible or implausible.

In her passionate response to my paper, Emily Hutten tells us that living in a culture of relativism and pessimism, Dordt students want to find truth that will result in a community of engaged praxis. She, and many of her classmates, long for a living faith characterized by integrity and radical discipleship to Jesus. Such a faith, she discerns, is not to be found in a worldview that is a thin veneer for an exclusivist ideology. Neither my paper, nor this exchange of ideas has addressed her concerns with any kind of finality. But such finality, I suspect, would just make things worse. If, however, this year’s Staley lectures opened up new ways of engaging Scripture in a postmodern age and sparked a renewed biblical imagination that

engenders a community of gospel praxis, then maybe Emily, her student colleagues, the faculty, and administrators of Dordt College will have the courage to “take heed of the ministry” they “have received in the Lord” and be able to “fulfill it” (Col. 4.17b).

END NOTES

1. (Leiden, New York, Koin: Brill, 1997).
2. Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984); Al Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular and Christian Opinions*, Translated by J. Kraay (Toronto: Wedge, 1979).
3. For further discussion of my understanding of biblical authority see “Reimagining Biblical Authority,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 26.2 (Winter 1996).
4. “Christian Schooling: Telling a Worldview Story.” in *The Crumbling Walls of Certainty*, edited by Ian Lambert and Suzanne Mitchell (Sydney: The Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997), p. 86. Fernhout is dependent here on Stanley Hauerwas, *A Christianity of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
5. For further discussion of the relation of gift and call see J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chs. 6 and 7; and James H. Olthuis, “Be(coming)ing: Humankind as Gift and Call,” *Philosophia Reformata* 58, 2 (1993).
6. Calvin G. Seerveld, “Footprints in the Snow,” *Philosophia Reformata* 56 (1991):30. For a detailed discussion of the role of interpretation in the traditional process, with specific reference to how such a process happens within scripture itself, see Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Paul and his Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1999), ch. 1.