

**Note:** This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Neufeldt-Fast, Arnold. "Postmodernity and the Strange New World of the Bible." *Missio Dei: Tyndale Seminary's Journal of Missional Christianity* 2 (July 2010): 1-4.

# Missio Dei

Tyndale Seminary's Journal of Missional Christianity



## • Volume 2, 2009-10

- A. Neufeldt-Fast, "Postmodernity and the Strange New World of the Bible"
- A. Jonker, "Hospitality as Mission"
- K. Livingston, "Sustaining the Long Obedience of Pastoral Ministry"
- A. Boers, "I was a Stranger"
- J. Yee, "Finding Rahab"
- H. A. Snyder, "The Mission of Jesus"
- R. Shaughnessy, "The Liminal Nature of the Missional Leader"
- K. Mutter, "Is Counselling A Missional Activity?"
- A. Kim, "Rethinking Current Missions"

## Postmodernity and the Strange New World of the Bible



Dr. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

July 2010

So often we hear our context described as post-modern, post-liberal, post-Christian, or the like. Despite the image of collapse, the language displays a certain dose of Canadian humility and politeness: we don't quite know yet what has really happened, but we sense that the shift beneath our feet has been seismic. Church leaders will want to pay attention to these attempts at description and analyses; we need accurate cultural maps to navigate our ministry. Yet, what is often forgotten amidst all the confusion, both by the traditional as well as the emerging churches, is the biblical-theological claim that the gospel of God's coming kingdom presents us with profound images of something so fundamentally new that every previous category of description and orientation collapses in its presence.

In his programmatic essay "The Strange New World of the Bible [1917]" (Barth 1957), Barth asked: What do we find in the Bible: History? Morality? Religion? He answered that in the Bible a strange new world opens up and projects itself into our ordinary world. As such it is not something appearing on the margins of culture. The Bible testifies to a history with its own distinct grounds and possibilities, a wholly different kingdom with its own moral logic and politics. Faith cannot be traced to any historical foundations. The Bible does not concern itself with our morality, our knowing and our piety, but God as God, God's history and God's reign. According to Barth, this focus does not lead us away from this world. On the contrary, it leads us deeper into the truth of this world. The Bible does not offer thoughts about a distant God, but rather witnesses to the divine perspective on humanity and the world. It testifies that God in Christ is establishing a new reality, a new heaven and a new earth, and that the Holy Spirit "will not stop nor stay until all that is dead has been brought to life and a new world has come into being" (Barth 1957, 50).

These are the reflections of a young Swiss pastor who struggled with the task of preaching the new reality in a world that was collapsing around him. In these reflections, Barth began to identify the contours of that "really" new world, as well as the critical theological and hermeneutical tools which, I believe, are still of service as we seek to orient our own churches, almost one hundred years later, in a post-modern, post-Christendom context.

Barth's break with the liberal Protestantism of his teachers and his theological re-orientation in the early part of the last century can, at one level, be summarized simply as a shift "back to the Bible." As is so often the case, re-orientation came through crisis; Karl Barth was one of only a few young pastors who was profoundly disturbed by the fact that the churches and their theologians were identifying Christianity almost completely with the cause of their own nation. This modern syncretism shocked these young preachers "back to the Bible", a major shift in theology, which Lesslie Newbigin identified as a search for a new form of Christian presence in Europe for the 20th century (Newbigin 1989, 196).

What Newbigin does not make sufficiently clear is that this was, above all, a hermeneutical shift. The crucial element in Barth's new theological foundation and orientation for the church was the discovery of that eschatological reality, the "strange new world," witnessed to in the Bible.

What does the Bible offer if not historical, moral or religious facts and insights? It witnesses to the ultimate concrete reality, namely the in-breaking eschatological reality of the risen and living Christ and his reign. This reality is utterly foreign to the mundane world which we create, shape and measure with our empirical tools. It is a personal reality that actively interrupts the settled continuities of our life and draws us and everything else into its sphere through judgement and grace.

No one who has read Barth's early writings (especially in the original German!) is left unmoved by the excited, expressionistic character of Barth's language, discovering and breathlessly sketching draft after draft of a very different interactive map which depicts a world immediately present to all, but one which only a few are truly seeing. Barth writes in a sermon from this early period, that God is no ...

... strange word on the margins of existence, but existence itself, which breaks forth powerfully through everything that is without being. No fifth wheel on the wagon, but the wheel that drives all wheels. No sanctuary on the periphery, but the one who enters mightily into the midst of all that is. No dark, mysterious power ... but the clear power of freedom which is above all and in all and seeks to be honoured through human beings. No thought or notion, but the power of life that conquers the powers of death ...! No decorative embellishment of the world, but a lever that moves the world! ... A living God; that is what living means! A God who is really God! (Barth 1999: 276f.)

God is God. Early, and then relentlessly, Barth put his finger on the problem of modern theology: Christian faith is "entirely and completely eschatology" (Barth 1968: 314), that is, it is caught up in and oriented to the coming reign of God. Christendom's eschatology, by comparison, is a realized eschatology where the Kingdom of God is identified with the structures of this world which we build and extend. For Barth, however, God's reign is a coming reality which determines what ultimately counts as real and what does not, what is finally marginal and destined for destruction and what is essential. This means that this strange, new eschatological reality has ontological and epistemological priority over our commonly shared experiential reality, including the church's present experience of marginality. In other words God's in-breaking kingdom determines and reveals what is actually real and this might contradict present appearances.

The theological task is therefore twofold. First, the church must be true to the eschatological reality to which scripture witnesses. This requires a sustained listening to the biblical narrative of the coming of God's reign. Back to the Bible! When we follow this advice, we will realize in new ways just how alive God actually is (Barth 1999: 276f.). According to Barth, this is the starting point for good Christian theology.

The second task is to interpret all of our individual experiences and our shared public reality through the framework provided by the eschatological reality of God's in-breaking reign. This entails placing what we know to be true by experience and reflection, using the tools of sociology, anthropology or psychology, into the world of meaning which God's reign creates. In short, the logic of this "strange new world of the Bible" requires that we turn our conceptual machinery upside-down. Everything which

we experience of the world is to be placed into the interpretative frame of reference of Christian convictions (that is, in light of that coming, eschatological reality).

In this way Karl Barth challenged the accommodation of Christian theology to the presumed conditions of truthful speech determined by the world. Barth's achievement is a recovery of the grammar of Christian speech. He refuses to separate our most fundamental Christian confession of Jesus as the Messiah, as Lord and Saviour, as the Coming One, from how we describe all of God's good creation and how we orient our lives ethically. In this sense Barth's "school," in my opinion, continues to offer the best available training for discovering that strange new world of the Bible and for training Christians how to employ Christian speech confidently and with integrity in the strange world of the twenty-first century.

## **Bibliography**

Barth, Karl. 1999. 12. August: Psalm 42,2-6, "Wo ist nun dein Gott?" In *Predigten 1917*, ed. H. Schmidt, 269-282. Zurich: TVZ Verlag.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1968. *Epistle to the Romans*. Tr. C. Hoskins. London: Oxford University.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1957. *The Strange new Within the Bible* (1916). In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, tr. D. Horton, 28-50. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957.

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1989. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.