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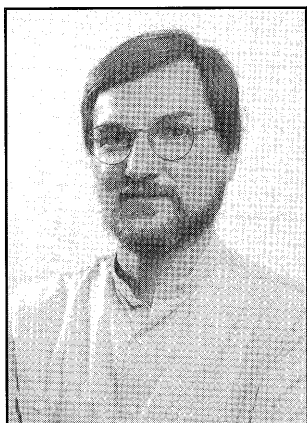


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RESPONSE TO BRIAN WALSH'S

Regimes of Truth and the Rhetoric of Deceit

—FROM A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE



by Mark Tazelaar

The most striking thing about Walsh's paper for me is the way that it takes very seriously interpretations of Scripture influenced by the work of Michel Foucault. His tone is not at all dismissive or condescending. We sense quite clearly that he has been deeply challenged by those strategies of interpretation, and that he engages them seriously. He provides, I think, a good model for all of us: confident, not cowering; sensitive, not condescending.

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Having said this, my concerns arise, as they often do, at the very point where things look most attractive. I am not worried about what Walsh may have missed or left out, but rather about whether, in taking the Foucauldian position so seriously, he has not granted it too much too easily. I am also not as comfortable tightly connecting our supposed "postmodern context" with Foucault as Walsh seems to be. Postmodernists come in many shapes and sizes. Given this variety, and even despite it, it is not clear to me that postmodernism dominates the discourse.

Walsh demonstrates clearly and forcefully that interpretations sensitive to rhetorical and ideological dimensions can help us to understand the ways Scripture speaks. Just as biblical hermeneutics has benefitted from a sensitivity to and appreciation for genre, so also it benefits from an analysis of rhetoric. We should note, moreover, that an appreciation for rhetoric is not as new a phenomenon as it may appear to be. Rhetoric already guided the early church fathers in their approaches to and understanding of Scripture. This, I would suggest, is not a trivial point. Postmodernists have not discovered rhetoric; rather, they are recovering rhetoric.

This recovery is not innocent however. At the same time as they are engaged in the recovery of rhetoric, postmodernists of the Foucauldian stripe claim to have discovered deeper dimensions to rhetorical practice. Rhetoric, it is argued, is implicated in ideology – in power-grabs aimed at establishing a totalizing regime of discourse. Therefore, we should not be surprised when Paul's use of rhetoric implicates him in power-grabbing.

Whether or not Paul was aware of this, so the argument goes, he was guilty of it – and we today should be wiser and more suspicious. The power-grabbing thrust at the heart of rhetorical practice has been exposed once and for all.

A lot of the issue, for me, turns right at this point. Should we grant to Foucauldians the discovery of an implicit connection between rhetoric and ideology? Let's say that we should. Is this the sole fruit of our recovery and appreciation for rhetoric? To believe this, in my mind, is to collapse rhetoric into ideology – to reduce rhetorical practices to exercises of power. If one accepts this reduction, then I suppose there would be no way out for a Christian but to accept the Foucauldian solution to all such hegemonically directed exercises of power: find one's identity with the marginalized, the excluded, the deviant.

If I have understood him correctly, Walsh shows that the charge made against Paul and his rhetoric does not stick. The gospel message is not an ideologically-supported exercise in power grabbing. Nor does the Gospel simply follow the paths of the positive alternative laid out by Foucault. As Walsh points out, the solution with which Foucauldians leave us is self-referentially inconsistent (i.e., unable to account for how it, and it alone, escapes the perpetuation of violence and exclusion). Walsh is right, I think, to challenge this and any interpretation which reduces the Gospel voice to being party to one side or the other of a Foucauldian-constructed opposition.

Walsh is right to show that a rhetorical analysis of this stripe restricts the voice of Scripture, by hearing it only in the tones of Foucauldian analysis (with all the commitments that entails). In making this argument, Walsh does not simply defend Scripture's voice against critics – as would be the case were he content only to say, in effect, that they have not heard Scripture's voice, or that they have gotten it wrong. Instead, Walsh suggests that the Bible makes claims that address its critics' concerns (and not just their criticisms). Walsh is affirming that Scripture can speak to Foucauldians (without demanding simply that they stop being Foucauldians before they will be addressed).

I have to admit that when I first read Walsh's piece, I understood him to be doing something

much simpler than what he is really doing. I thought he was succumbing to the temptation to which many of us have succumbed when we pretend that dualism can only be recognized, addressed, and corrected by Scripture and/or Scripturally-directed thinking. My fear was that Walsh was suggesting that Scripture is our last line of defense in the face of the Foucauldian onslaught (Which in principle it would be, if ever the onslaught got that far – but that possibility is one I seriously doubt, since it grants way too much to Foucault. Though I said above that I worry Walsh grants too much to Foucault, I don't believe he is granting this much). In fact, however, the inner inconsistencies of Foucault's position (including its duality and attendant reductions of complexity) have been noted not only by Walsh, but have also been recognized and criticized by many within and without the Christian tradition.

And not only that. Christians and non-Christians alike have not stopped merely at the point of detecting the difficulties with Foucault's analyses. They also operate with a broader though varying sense of what a recovery and appreciation for the rhetorical tradition requires. For these, the recovery and appreciation of rhetoric stands for (and must stand for) something more than what the Foucauldian hearkens to. I do believe this is entirely compatible with Walsh's position on the matter. But though I think that he does not accept the collapse of rhetoric into ideology, it is not clear to me that he finds it urgent to pursue the positive possibilities open to one who does reject that collapse.

If I connect this with the affirmation made above—that Scripture can directly address the concerns of Foucauldians—my point should become clearer.

We saw that a Foucauldian analysis restricts the ways Scripture speaks, and forces it into an unsatisfying either/or. Walsh's analysis shows that Scripture cannot be reduced to and held within these strictures. In so doing, he not only defends Scripture against detraction, but shows how Scripture in fact may respond to the very terms within which the detraction was put forward. In so responding, however, I would suggest that Scripture does not simply manufacture or construct a new set of terms and categories that now

stand opposed to terms and categories previously available (I deny “manufacture” and “construction” here, since this is exactly what the Foucauldian believes has to be done and is done by every new exercise of the will to power. But Scripture doesn’t have a radically new message constructed for each supposed radically new age). Furthermore, Scripture rightfully may, and does, demand more integrity of the position which first issued the charge against it. Scripture doesn’t simply refute; nor does it simply accept and respond in the terms of one’s own present self-understanding. Though Scripture may stoop down to our postmodern situation, that does not make us any less guilty of—among other things—poor, sloppy, or insufficient scholarship. In fact, that stooping can and should convict us even more strongly of our shortcomings in, among other things, scholarship.

Poor scholarship? That sounds like an awfully strong charge. It is not as harsh and as unjustified as it may sound, as I will attempt to show.

One of the best things about Walsh’s paper is his wonderful articulation of the Gospel message of shalom. I believe that the shape and depth of this testimony is deeply connected to the urgency he feels to respond to a postmodern context. Insofar as this response opens Scripture to us, it far surpasses my own reaction to the Foucauldian analysis of Paul. My own response, I’m afraid, is not nearly so profound or moving. It tends more toward the academic – though I hope it is not for that reason any less heartfelt. For my part, I couldn’t help but wonder why the postmodernists, as Walsh presents them, don’t require more of themselves in their attempt to appreciate and recover the rhetorical tradition. And if they are making it this easy on themselves – shouldn’t we call them on that?

What do I mean by suggesting they are making it easy on themselves? Earlier I suggested that Foucauldian analyses seem to reduce rhetoric to its function as an ideological tool – to collapse rhetorical practice to being merely a function of power-grabbing. To call this a “discovery” is to be quite charitable. If it is a discovery, it is not a novel one.

It sounds to me like the popularized version of Plato’s attack on rhetoric. But even Plato didn’t take such a reductionist view of rhetoric. So what we may have, then, is a recovery and repetition of a poor understanding of Plato. That is what I mean by accusing this position of poor scholarship. The classical tradition, Paul, the church fathers, would be miles ahead of us on this one.

Positive work in rhetorical analysis – of the kind of which Walsh’s work is an example – is required. A broader, critical recovery of the rhetorical tradition is needed, so that we don’t fall into the trap ourselves of dismissing rhetoric altogether only because we have mistaken a poor reflection of it for the real thing. I think that at least implicit within the conditions for Scripture’s address to us, manifested more explicitly and forcefully within the address itself, is the demand for that kind of integrity from us. In this case, the kind of integrity I have in mind would be one that takes the recovery of the rhetorical tradition more seriously. Rhetorical practice, for example, has always demanded sensitivity to one’s audience – and indeed respect for one’s audience. Only in a culture of mass media and mass advertising might one believe such sensitivity to be impossible or unnecessary. To accuse Paul of succumbing to temptations that are more characteristic of our time is anachronistic at best.

But there is a deeper point. Sensitivity and respect for one’s audience is demanded because we must be careful to identify and sort through what joins and what distinguishes our listeners at any time. 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. But when we connect our understanding of worldviews only, or too exclusively, with the language of ideology and power, then these possibilities that rhetorical practices may open for us are closed over. In short, there are more complex ways to be related to a worldview—to live through it—that to be simply its dupe (or, if not its dupe, then to be simply its antagonist—its other). Rhetorical practices open some of these ways.