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## Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology (Book Review)

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critically on the models of Christian education we currently support and perpetuate.

To mitigate this admittedly negative conclusion, let me say that *A Vision With a Task* offers new hope for truly distinctive Christian education. If distinctiveness is of concern to us—and it should be in view of the enormous financial sacrifices our schools require—we should study and discuss this book in

*The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*, by Richard Lints (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). 336 pages. \$19.99, paperback. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Associate Professor of Theology.

Christian publishing, like fashion, has its trends. Books on the New Age Movement are out. Let's all hope that praying-for-weight-loss books have passed their apogee. Books about evangelicalism, however, are definitely hot, particularly books on what's wrong with evangelicalism. Postmodernism is in too. I didn't say *good*, but *in*. Whether it's a good thing depends upon whose book you read, but it's almost a requirement right now for any author to take stock of postmodern culture's tendency to affirm confessional pluralism and the relativity of all worldviews and knowledge. If the writer can work in his or her diagnosis of the cultural and moral malaise of evangelicalism, so much the better.

Lints has done that, and done it better than most. His analysis of postmodernism is genuinely instructive. His examination of evangelicalism is insightful and, I think, sadly dead-on. But neither of these are the center of the book. They are occasional and contextual to Lints' purpose. He wants to do something that he confesses is not a popular or burning concern within evangelicalism. He wants to reconstruct the capacity for thinking Christianly within the body of Christ. In order to think with the mind of Christ, the church needs to learn how to think about and reflect upon biblical revelation (6). It is only when the church has regained its biblical moorings and immerses itself in the biblical story that it will be able "to bring the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life" (182).

While Lints describes his task as prolegomenal, and in reading it I came to think of the book as an introduction to theological hermeneutics, the issue throughout is Scripture. Not the Bible as a thing out there somewhere, but as the written Word of God living within the lives of the people of God. In appeal and challenge more than in complaint, Lints claims:

It is a fundamental challenge facing contemporary theology to educate a church that is largely ignorant of the Scriptures and therefore largely ignorant of

detail. It will help us regain and restate a sorely needed educational vision in a darkening world. *A Vision With a Task* represents, I believe, one of the most significant attempts to date, both to articulate the biblical direction in which Christian schools should be moving and to suggest concrete, practical steps to do so. It is a book Christian educators cannot afford to ignore.

the controlling biblical images and metaphors that have informed theology in ages past. The translation of the redemptive historical message of the Scriptures into the vernacular of modern culture will be meaningless unless and until the church itself is educated in the vernacular of the Scriptures. We have to go back before we can go forward. (112-13)

The Christian task is to bring human life and endeavor under the judgmental and transformative light of the Word of God. But this task is exceedingly difficult. First, it is difficult because evangelicals, for all their celebrated loyalty to Scripture, are in the end more loyal to a view of the Bible than they are to immersing themselves in and living out the story that the Bible conveys. Reducing the Bible to a collection of lectures on a few fundamental dogmas and a catalog of practical, easy to follow, moral examples, evangelicalism has effectively removed itself from the Bible's critical analysis of our lives and our world.

Second, the task of bringing Scripture to bear upon our lives is difficult because reading the Bible is not easy (69). There. Someone finally said it. Reading the Bible, really reading the Bible is hard work. Reading the Bible well is every bit as difficult as hitting a fastball and decidedly more difficult than rough carpentry. It takes time, commitment, self-awareness, and an awareness of the nature and purpose of the text before us. Evangelical commitments to the complete perspicuity of Scripture and the democracy of interpretation are just plain wrong—and the prevalence of those commitments demand that evangelicals relearn how to read. Add a magical view of the work of the Holy Spirit to evangelical individualism and perspicuity, and its little wonder that American Protestantism has produced the number of sects and cults that it has.

One of the ironies of the evangelical tradition (and there are many) is its often-voiced commitment to absolutes. Generalizations are always dicey, but Lints contends that evangelicals have tended to elevate and

even enshrine personal subjective experience. The only thing absolute for the American evangelical is the "living pope" of the individual heart (53). If Lints is right, and I think he is, the evangelical tradition is something of a popularization of the Enlightenment criticism of all authority external to the self. The evangelical has simply replaced Enlightenment reason with revivalist experience. Either way, what you get is immediate, unmediated truth. Tradition, creed, church, history, are all purged in the ascendancy of the narcissistic self.

This is where postmodernism comes in. Postmodernism is *post* only in the sense that it has given up the Enlightenment dream of a universal reason. In place of a single authoritative reason, there is now a vast number of reasoners. There is only human experience, no external authorities; only subjective assumptions, no objective truth; only pragmatic and political truths, no Truth. The subjective turn made in the Enlightenment and popularized in American democracy and revivalism has come to full nihilistic maturity in the "studied ambiguity" of postmodernism's elevation of expediency and pragmatism over truth (197-204).

Lints suggests that postmodernist approaches to culture, philosophy, and theology (add literature and the arts), are so methodologically engrossed that one rarely gets beyond methodology (222). I think that's right. Where evangelicals tend to give little attention to their involvement in the hermeneutical enterprise, postmoderns can't seem to see their way through it. After they've discussed *how* they can speak meaningfully about reality, they find that there isn't anything to speak meaningfully about.

Rather than merely report the failings of either evangelicalism or postmodern culture, Lints provides a real response to the subjectivist dilemma, a dilemma which postmodernism is careful to protect, and one that evangelicals fall into due to their cultural commitment to individual experience. Both the truth of the text and the reality of the interpretive enterprise must be taken seriously. Lints speaks of the *reality principle* and the *bias principle* here. The reality principle is that human beings are capable of knowing the world as it really is. There is a world out there and we really know it. The bias principle says that we never know that world apart from a set of biases or cultural presuppositions (20-27).

Ignoring their own biases, evangelicals have held that their reading of Scripture is unimpeded by historical or cultural factors. Fearing relativism, they have tended to ignore the interpreter and talk about truth in rather detached, impersonal, and ahistorical ways. Where evangelicalism absolutizes the reality principle, postmodernism has moved in the opposite direction. There is no truth, only biases. Bringing Lints' two principles together to answer both evangelicalism and postmodernism, we might say that the world is not relative, but we are.

Recognizing our own subjectivity, that we always read the Bible through the lenses or filters of our cultures and traditions and personal experiences, does not sell us into relativism. Lints challenges evangelicals to admit their biases, for only when bias is acknowledged can it be brought under the critical gaze of Scripture. As Lints puts it: only then will we begin to listen to the text instead of dictating our own prejudices to it (58). Throughout the book runs a healthy, yet implicit, criticism of reader-response approaches to hermeneutics. Lints quite rightly insists that biblical truth is something we discover. We do not forge it or negotiate it. I would add that purveyors of reader-response approaches to textual meaning simply do not know how to read. They might have mastered the grammar, but they've missed the point. What is dangerous in literature and the arts is downright deadly when it comes to reading the Word of God. Modern reader response approaches to the Bible bring God's Word under the imperialistic authority of the individual reader and enshrine his or her perspective. These are the very things Scripture is concerned to break.

In order to know the presuppositions and biases that a culture imposes, we must be students of our culture. But we must also be students of Scripture. The Bible has its own bias, a bias to which we must orient ourselves if we want to develop a Christian mind. The biblical bias is that the truth of the Word of God, and the fundamental truth about us, is to be found within the flow of the history found in the gospel story. Christian character cannot be created without the development of the mind of Christ, and that mind is truly developed only when we make the structure of biblical revelation our own plausibility structure. Lints is insistent that that structure is found only in our paying attention to the whole counsel of God, by which he means the full sweep of redemptive history (70, 261). The Bible is not a theological dictionary or a dogmatic treatise, but an on-going, progressive story. It is in terms of the drama of redemption, not a collection of abstract theological *loci*, that our lives make sense and hold together (265-74).

The one drawback to the book is that it is not written for the casual reader. Lints has much good to say. He is orthodox throughout, and often illuminating. But he is not a stylish writer. Sections that could have been very powerful—such as the chapter on Scripture as a redemptive history (chap. 7) are full of helpful advice and sound biblical thinking but lack the simple and compelling articulation which would make the book memorable. This is too bad. (A good book is a terrible thing to waste on first year seminarians.) I fear that that is the only market for Lints' commendable labor. Eerdmans goofed. An editor with a sense of style and clarity of expression should have taken this book under arm long before it reached publication.