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Telling God's Story by Gerard Loughlin

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Gerard Loughlin

Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xv + 266 pp.

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It takes a bold author to treat an aging theological trend as if it were new. This may sound like a backhanded compliment, but it is meant to express sincere appreciation for the new life which Gerard Loughlin has breathed into narrative theology. Indeed, only at a remove of a couple of decades from the origins of the school of thought called "narrative theology" is Loughlin able to situate this theology properly as an alternative to both liberal and deconstructionist or textualist theologies.

Loughlin begins his book with the most simple and concise characterization of the difference between the modern and the postmodern that I have seen. The modern is the attempt to comprehend and control the world, to "tell it like it is" in one grand narrative based on an unshakable foundation of human rationality. The postmodern is the conviction that "how it is" is constituted by the telling; language does not accurately map a reality outside of language, but reality is constructed by the stories told about it. At this point Loughlin does not so much argue that modernism is exhausted

as assume it, and he goes on to consider two ways of dealing theologically with the advent of postmodernism. The first is the textualist approach of Don Cupitt and Mark C. Taylor, for whom God is nothing but a story we tell. It matters that we keep on telling stories, but ultimately we must realize that they remain mere shadows, and there is no escape from Plato's cave. Loughlin perceptively likens such a space to the windowless shopping mall which defines the postmodern landscape. He also notes that textualism, while denying the possibility of grand narratives, is itself a grand narrative with a nihilist conclusion.

The second theological approach to the postmodern, what Loughlin calls "orthodox postmodern theology," agrees with textualism that reality is constituted in narratives, but believes that there is only one narrative that is true: that of Jesus Christ. God is not simply a story that we tell; rather we are a story told by God. The Bible exerts a tyrannical claim over us. The Bible is omnivorous, and demands that all our other stories be inscribed into the larger story of sin and salvation that the Bible tells. This is nothing new, of course. Loughlin cites Auerbach's work, which locates this reading of the Bible at the root of Western civilization. What makes it both *pre-* and *post-*modern is its refusal of the modernist attempt to fit the church's story into the world's story, to pre-establish the *possibility* of revelation on rational foundations.

Much of the first half of Loughlin's book is engaged in a fruitful conversation with Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. From Frei, Loughlin takes an insistence that there is no standard, either outside or behind the story that one encounters in the biblical text, by which to judge the text. In this respect Loughlin provides a helpful explanation and defense of the medieval primacy of the literal meaning of the Scripture. From Lindbeck, Loughlin takes an understanding of doctrines which sees them as summary rules for the telling of the Christian story. In the course of his fine discussion of Frei and Lindbeck, Loughlin patiently addresses some of the facile charges of sectarianism and irrationalism against the Yale school—

charges which, though dispatched many times before, continue to roam the more dimly-lit precincts of the theological landscape like the undead.

Crucial to Loughlin's argument is his treatment of the church as that body which continues Christ's body in the world. The church consumes God's story in order to become its bearer to the world. Biblical inspiration is therefore located not only in the writing but in the reading of Scripture. Loughlin is careful to make clear that such a practice of inspiration is guaranteed by the person of Christ and not some general theory of reading such as that provided by the New Criticism. Loughlin is less careful in spelling out the implications of his narrative theology for the doctrine of God. In his zeal to emphasize the embodiment of the story of God in the church, the church's story becomes the originary tale. "Insofar as the church tells the stories of Father and Son, one can say that the Spirit narrates Father and Son, and thus that Father and Son proceed as much from the Spirit as that the Spirit proceeds from one or both of them" (p. 192). The great trinitarian debates that have animated East-West discussions for centuries are not so much solved as thrown out the window. "Nor is it necessary to hold to or not hold to the *Filioque*. What is necessary is that we learn to move more freely, more adventurously, in the stories of God" (p. 194). With a similarly decisive "whatever," Loughlin dismisses the question of naming God as Father, Son, and Spirit. It would be easier to ignore these gaffes if they did not threaten to undermine Loughlin's own careful exposition of Lindbeck, for whom doctrines — such as the East-West agreement that the Father does *not* "proceed" from the Spirit — regulate how adventuresome one becomes with the biblical narratives. The larger threat to Loughlin's account comes from a thin Christology which reads the Gospels not as the story of Jesus, but as the story of the church (p. 214). If followed, this road leads back to Cupitt's cave, where God is nothing other than the stories we tell.

Happily, Loughlin does not go far down this road. His book concludes with an interest-

ing exposition of some "orthodox postmodern" thought on the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the story we consume that allows us to embody God's story for the world. This chapter is a fitting consummation to an unapologetic theology which seeks nothing less than to envelop the world in the biblical narrative. □
