

REVIEW ARTICLES

WHY I'M STILL AFRAID: A RESPONSE TO JAMES K. A. SMITH'S *WHO'S AFRAID OF POSTMODERNISM?*

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James K. A. Smith's new book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*,² is very readable, and has an impressive grasp of details and interconnections.¹ I do not target it because of any special weakness I find in it, but rather because it represents some of the best writing that postmodernists have produced. As such, it helps (albeit in an unintended way) to move forward the debate over postmodernism. That is because the problems that beset postmodernism become more obvious the more postmodernists explain themselves in plain language.

I. *Postmodernism*

Smith sets out to clear up misunderstandings (as he sees it) of postmodernism, particularly as these have been spread by misreadings of postmodernist formulas. He believes that a number of frequently repeated lines from postmodernist thinkers have been unduly turned into slogans, and names three in particular: "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida), postmodernism is "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard), and "Power is knowledge" (Foucault). These lines have been torn from their context, Smith claims, causing them to be understood in ways that Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault never intended. Anti-postmodernists have essentially been reading these lines as if they were "bumper stickers":

Once we appreciate the context of these claims . . . we see two things: First, they mean something different than what the "bumper-sticker" reading suggests. The bumper-sticker readings that turn these claims into slogans tend to perpetuate a number of myths about postmodernism. My goal is to demythologize postmodernism by showing that what we commonly think so-called postmodernists are saying is usually not the case. Second, and perhaps more provocatively, I will demonstrate that, in fact, all these claims have a deep affinity with central Christian claims.²

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¹ James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (The Church and Postmodern Culture; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006). Smith's book is the first in a new series that he edits for Baker Academic.

² *Ibid.*, 22.

While I grant that problems arise when readers fail to consult contexts, and that this problem is especially acute where slogans (intended or not) are at work, there are also problems with Smith's attempts to set the record straight. The problems begin even before Smith tells us what these formulas originally meant. For one thing, Smith seems to imply that if the anti-postmodernists had only understood Derrida's, Lyotard's, and Foucault's claims correctly, then their numbers would be much smaller. In fact, Smith gives the impression that the main reason postmodernism has detractors at all is that it is poorly understood.³ But the number of people who understand Derrida's, Lyotard's, and Foucault's claims the way Smith explains them, and *who reject them anyway* (on rational, evidential, or religious grounds), is far too great for Smith simply to sweep under the rug.

And while there might be problems with how some anti-postmodernists have taken these "slogans," the greater problems often lie with the way they are taken by those who belong to certain postmodernist movements, including movements that Smith supports. This is clearly the case with the first formula that Smith wants to de-sloganize. Smith maintains that anti-postmodernists have done Derrida a disservice by taking his claim that "there is nothing outside the text" in an overly literal way: "Many have understood Derrida as a linguistic idealist who thinks there is only language, not things—only texts, not cups or tables."⁴ As Smith explains, Derrida did not mean that things do not really exist out there in the prelinguistic world, but only that our attempts to interpret the real world can never get beyond (or around) an endless chain of interpretations: "In the line of Martin Heidegger . . . [Derrida] is what we might call—for lack of a better term—a comprehensive hermeneuticist who asserts the ubiquity of interpretation; all our experience is always already an interpretation."⁵ The problem with this, of course, is that whatever understanding of truth an interpreter happens to use in connection with texts, he or she must also use that same understanding in connection with the pre-interpretive world as a whole. If one's alethiology (= understanding of truth) privileges the epistemic over the ontic with respect to interpreting texts, then it must grant the same privilege with respect to objects and events. Smith writes as though admitting Derrida's explicit acceptance of the reality of referents should allay any problem that anti-postmodernists might have with Derrida, but in fact that acceptance is really a part of the problem. It is not a matter of weighing individual components of the deconstructionist view

³ This is especially true when Smith refers to Derrida's *Christian* detractors: "[Derrida] is not advocating a kind of linguistic idealism. As such, the earlier criticisms of Derrida by Christian thinkers miss the mark" (*Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 22). Smith does not write "some Christian thinkers," but simply "Christian thinkers," as if a clear majority of these Christians misunderstand Derrida! He also writes that the "linguistic idealist" model represents how Derrida "is commonly understood by Christians, especially Christian theologians" (*ibid.*, 35).

⁴ *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 35. "There is nothing outside the text" comes from Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

⁵ *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 39. There are numerous variations of this basic insight. E.g., cf. Hayden White's claim that "there are no extra-ideological grounds on which to arbitrate among the conflicting conceptions of the historical process and of historical knowledge" (*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973], 26).

of the world. Rather, it is a matter of finding a way to hold all those components together within a self-consistent scheme. To defend a theory of meaning based on the act of interpretation (as all deconstructionists do) is to invoke a linguistic alethiology (viz., one in which an epistemic reflection of the world represents reality). But to defend the extra-textual reality of referents (as Smith shows Derrida to do) is to invoke a *prelinguistic* alethiology (viz., one in which the world itself represents reality). The only way to hold these together consistently is to find a way to separate religious meaning from the really-out-there, and the only way to do that is to turn religion into some sort of game that does not impinge upon true reality.

Reality *cannot* be both linguistic and prelinguistic—it must be one way or the other. When anti-postmodernists speak of deconstructionists denying the reality of referents, they are only unpacking the clear implication of the deconstructionists' most central commitments. Hal Childs has referred to this sort of double-mindedness about the relation of truth to ontic and epistemic categories as possessing a “split ontology.”⁶ James Barr has referred to it as being “stuck with two theories.”⁷ No matter what we call it, the problem is irreducible. While it plagues Derrida's scheme (in terms of his assumed theory of meaning and his explicit defense of the reality of the referent), anti-postmodernist theologians are more commonly troubled by the double-mindedness of deconstructionist attempts to combine their assumed theory of meaning with the propositionalist content of the apostolic kerygma. The issue is not whether a readerly hermeneutic and the reality of referents is each possible on its own terms, but whether one is compossible with the other. Like Derrida before him, Smith reasons as if hermeneutics and alethiology were autonomous free sectors, not affecting one another.⁸ He fails to realize that they are mutually implicating spheres of inquiry.

This point can be illustrated by way of quoting an instance (in another writer) that properly recognizes the logic the erasure of which creates the conundrum. Sue Patterson opens the first chapter in her *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age* in the following way:

Realism makes the commonsense claim that physical objects exist independently of being perceived. ‘On this perspective’, comments Hilary Putnam, ‘the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is. Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.’⁹

⁶ *The Myth of the Historical Jesus and the Evolution of Consciousness* (SBLDS 179; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000), 40. Childs directs this charge at John Dominic Crossan.

⁷ *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 416. Barr directs this charge at Brevard Childs.

⁸ To insist that meaning is an ontic commodity is not to suggest that all meaning is true in the sense of having pure referential integrity. It is merely to suggest that meaning is the static element in all communication, and that its referential dimension anchors it in preinterpretive reality. This is just as true of message-ridden fiction as it is of historical writing.

⁹ Sue Patterson, *Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12 (quoting Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 49).

Here we see a claim about “realism” that sounds very much like what Smith claims is true about Derrida’s view of referents: that they exist prior to their casting any sort of epistemic shadow. Putnam derives from “this perspective” that truth “involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.” Smith’s Derrida would seem to deny this inference, inasmuch as he does not acknowledge that the affirmation that “physical objects exist independently of being perceived” should in any way necessitate a theory of meaning involving a “correspondence relation” between words and things (especially one in which “there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is”). That is not only *where*, but also *why*, Derrida is wrong.

In offering his corrected understanding of Derrida’s slogan, Smith implies that good postmodernists do not believe the nonsense that has often been attributed to Derrida. But if that is so, then why did Smith direct his new book against those “afraid” of postmodernism? The chief culprits in the (supposed) misappropriation of Derrida’s words are not the anti-postmodernists but the *post-liberals*. It is *they* who chide historical critics for “going behind the text.” The idea that one should not look “behind the text” (which is Hans Frei’s loaded way of saying that one should not locate meaning in a text’s referential function) is not meant to instill a sense of how hard it is to know what a text really says, but rather to promote a definite theory of meaning that denies the role of extratextual reference altogether.¹⁰ As far as meaning is concerned, the text (they say) “is all there is.” And by that, they mean (rather insistently) that one should not dabble in questions about the referents. This is a far cry from Smith’s (initial) “corrected reading” of Derrida, which implies that we may ask about a text’s historical referents as much as we want, as long as we realize that interpretations always lie in the way of a direct engagement of those referents.¹¹ Whether the postliberal position is a “bumper stickerization” of Derrida or of the Reformers’ *sola scriptura* slogan, it is a terrific misrepresentation of the theory of meaning assumed by the writers of the NT.

Does Smith not notice all this? The truth is that he does—he too uses the language of “get[ting] to what is behind the text” as a term of abuse for those who place meaning in the author’s intention or the referent.¹² It is also important to understand that Smith’s initial “correction” of these supposed misreadings of Derrida leaves out a lot of important details, which Smith fills in later. So while

¹⁰ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

¹¹ What does Smith mean when he notes Derrida’s reaction against an anti-referential reading of his views? According to Smith, “Derrida . . . emphasizes that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ does ‘not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naïve enough to believe and to have accused [me] of believing’” (*Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 42 n. 9 [quoting Jacques Derrida, afterword to *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 148]). How does the acknowledgement of the referents’ reality impinge upon Derrida’s hermeneutic? Or Smith’s?

¹² *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 37.

Derrida acknowledges that referents really exist, the fact is that they do not enter into his theory of meaning (so the question of whether they exist or not would appear to be academic).

In picking on postliberals for promoting what Smith says is a wrong reading of Derrida, I do not mean to imply that Smith's "corrected" reading of Derrida works any better. If Derrida's point was simply that language is interpretation "all the way down," at best we can agree with him only halfway. As F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp writes, "Though we must always talk about and describe things from some perspective and using some language, it does not follow that everything then is perspective and description."¹³ What Derrida fails to realize is that the real world is always rushing in upon our language, and that, just as it is impossible to have a purely objective thought, so also it is impossible to have a purely subjective thought. (As H. Richard Niebuhr noted fifty years ago, "The subjective can no more be meaningfully abstracted from the objective than vice versa.")¹⁴ Our language can never shut out the real world. This allows for critical means to exist for improving our interpretations' relation to reality. The deconstructionist observation that all interpretation is dependent on other interpretations is just a minor facet of the more generally recognized truth that there is a perpetual gap between language and reality (or between knowledge and truth). The question before us is how we should conceptualize the imperfection of that perpetual gap. Derrida and other deconstructionists seem to overstate the problem, as if our access to the world might be symbolized by a hopelessly lost courier or a broken telephone line. The Apostle Paul sums up the dilemma with the comparatively hopeful metaphor of a lens—a *darkling* lens, but a real lens nonetheless (1 Cor 13:12). In contrast to the lens metaphor, deconstruction fails to recognize any work of transcendence in the phenomenon of reference.

To understand Smith fully, one should perhaps begin with his acceptance of a postliberal understanding of the nature of Scripture. That understanding is based (ironically) on one of the greatest "bumper stickerizations" of a slogan on record: the redefinition of the concept of a "return to Scripture" by basing a hermeneutic of Scripture on the *fact* of the biblical canon, rather than on what the *content* of that canon calls for.¹⁵ Smith shows these commitments in his explanation of why Derrida's claim "can be considered a radical translation of the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*": that claim, according to Smith, "should push us to recover . . . (a) the centrality of Scripture for mediating our understanding of the world as a whole and (b) the role of community in the

¹³ "Rethinking Historical Criticism," *BibInt* 7 (1999): 235-71, esp. 265.

¹⁴ *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, with Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 12.

¹⁵ See John C. Poirier, "The Canonical Approach and the Idea of 'Scripture,'" *ExpTim* 116 (2005): 366-70. Stanley Hauerwas does not even try to conceal the violence of this gesture: "Once Paul's letters become . . . constructed canonically [as Hauerwas thinks is implied by their scriptural status], Paul becomes one interpreter among others of his letters" (*Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1993], 20).

interpretation of Scripture.”¹⁶ But embracing “the centrality of Scripture” does not necessarily imply buying into a synchronic reading of Scripture. Although item (a) does not privilege one hermeneutic of Scripture over another, Smith undoubtedly intends this reference to “the centrality of Scripture” as a set-up for subsequent arguments—arguments that *do* privilege one hermeneutic over another. Those arguments, hatched a few pages later, involve a one-sided unpacking of the idea of “mediating” an “understanding of the world as a whole,” combined with a theorizing of “the role of community in the interpretation of Scripture.” Smith’s way of bringing the reading community into the hermeneutic of choice traces lines all too familiar to critics of postliberal theology: he brings up the fact that readers inevitably get in the way of their own attempts to discern a text’s meaning, and disguises that fact as a theory of meaning somehow legitimated by the text’s own inscribed commitments. This is an old sleight of hand, by which *etic* sociological descriptions (of the interpretative process) are enlisted as *emic* theological prescriptions (of where religious readers are supposed to find meaning in a text). Whether the argument appears to work, of course, depends on how well it is disguised as something more legitimate.¹⁷

II. “Truth” versus “Knowledge”

Smith’s fuller account of how Derrida’s scheme supports postliberalism moves from noting the inescapability of interpretation to privileging the interpretive paradigm of a given community of interpreters. A number of problems arise at this point, involving several conceptual muddles at the heart of postmodernist thinking. To sort out the mess will require some effort on the part of the reader, but the effort will be repaid. First, it is important to recognize that postmodernists, like Smith, consistently fail to distinguish between ontic and

¹⁶ *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 23.

¹⁷ The reasoning I am challenging is exemplified by Francis Watson: “That the Christian Bible in its canonical form does actually exist as a structured whole [is] an assumption integral to the concept of ‘canon’” (*Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 247). In keeping with this understanding, Watson further speaks of a “principle of non-contradiction that is implied in [the] canonicity” of the “canonical texts” (257). He perhaps fails to realize that his understanding of “canon” is highly artificial, and was not at all shared by the original canonizers of the NT. There was no “principle of non-contradiction” in *their* understanding, as the principle of inclusion in the canon was that of apostolic testimony, nothing else. And saying that there is *some* principle of structure is not to say that the concept of canon in itself establishes some sort of formalist hermeneutic. (The principle of order within Paul’s letters is dictated by nothing more than the technology of book production: they have been given to us in descending order according to length!) John Lawson gives an account of how religious communities’ understandings of canonical writings evolve from one in which “they are . . . of authority *on account of their authorship*” to one in which “the works of the authors are declared to be of authority *because they are in the recognized Holy Book*” (*The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* [London: Epworth, 1943], 33 [emphasis in the original]). Smith and Watson represent the advent of the latter paradigm within Christianity, while I remain with the former. I do so because the NT speaks only in terms of the former (in the sense that it centers theological authority on the apostolic kerygma), and there are no necessary theological grounds for embracing this purely sociological development.

epistemic categories.¹⁸ This is most evident when postmodernists discuss the nature of truth, for they inevitably do so in the context of a discussion of epistemology, as if *truth* (an ontic category) and *epistemology* (tautologically epistemic) were either identical or subsumable one within the other.¹⁹ (Smith provides us with a terrific example of this categorical confusion on p. 43 of his book, where he switches back and forth between “truth” and “knowledge” as if they were interchangeable.) This is a fatal schoolboy error that strikes at the heart of the entire postmodernist project.²⁰ In the hands of postmodernist writers, it can set up any one of a number of analytic-sounding statements whose unpacking makes it appear that truth is indeterminate. The same ontic/epistemic confusion can be found in postmodernist discussions of *meaning*: just as postmodernists have confused *truth itself* with *knowing the truth*, so also they have confused *meaning itself* with *knowing meaning*, causing them to place meaning within the realm of linguistics and its perpetual search for epistemic closure. That realm, of course, is where the community is found, hence the apparent ease with which postliberals and other postmodernists (wrongly) argue that meaning resides *there* rather than with the author’s intention.

Smith writes that “communities fix contexts, and contexts determine meanings.”²¹ As an example of how the latter works, Smith shows how a single word takes on different meanings when shouted on different occasions: “If I shout ‘Duck!’ in a field while we’re hunting, you will look upward for a target; if we’re golfing and I shout ‘Duck!’ you should assume a fetal position to avoid an incoming projectile.”²² I agree with this analysis, as far as it goes, but it is hardly relevant for the issue at hand, since the way in which “Duck!” is understood in both instances will correspond precisely with the way in which the one shouting most likely intended it. A better test would consist of an ambiguous context, in which it is not clear whether “Duck!” is a reference to the bird flying overhead or a warning to someone that he or she is in danger of being hit on the noggin. Most readers, I think, will agree that in that instance the *true* meaning of “Duck!” depends on what the one shouting is trying to say. An unintended reaction on the part of the one listening would reflect a *wrong* interpretation. Contrary to what

¹⁸ The problem is explained in Harald Atmanspacher, “Determinism is Ontic, Determinability is Epistemic,” in *Between Chance and Choice: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Determinism* (ed. Harald Atmanspacher and Robert Bishop; Thorverton, U.K.: Imprint Academic, 2002), 49-74, esp. 50.

¹⁹ Daniel D. Williams long ago differentiated two uses of the term “truth”: the “truth of things themselves,” and “the adequation of the thing and the understanding” (“Truth in the Theological Perspective,” *JR* 28 [1948]: 242-54, esp. 244-45). As Williams notes, “The failure to make this distinction [between an ontic and an epistemic use of ‘truth’] is one of the underlying fallacies in the theological attack on the so-called ‘objectivism’ of philosophy” (245). Williams shows that this error occurs in the works of Søren Kierkegaard and Emil Brunner (245-46).

²⁰ See John C. Poirier, “The Epistemology/Alethiology Double Switch in Postfoundationalist Hermeneutics,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 9 (2006): 19-28. That article deals at length with the arguments of Philip Kenneson, whom Smith cites in support of his own views (*Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 48 n. 12).

²¹ *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 53.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

Smith claims, the context does not really create the meaning of the word. Rather, it offers clues to what it *already* means. The same, of course, is true of Scripture, whose meaning is fixed prior to any reading event (individual or communal). This is why the church's greatest resource for understanding Scripture correctly is not tradition, but (dare I say it?) historical criticism.

A second must for understanding postliberals is to recognize what they make of the narrative structure of the apostolic kerygma. According to Smith, "The faith is inextricably linked to the events and story of God's redemptive action in the world: Christian faith rests on the work of the Word, who 'suffered under Pontius Pilate,' and that work can only be properly proclaimed by being narrated, by telling a story."²³ This is true, as far as it goes, but it can be said in a more philosophically responsible way, as Smith's use of "story" functions here quite a bit like a "bumper sticker." It is at this point that postliberal reasoning gets especially slippery:

Isn't it curious that God's revelation to humanity is given not as a collection of propositions or facts but rather within a narrative—a grand, sweeping story from Genesis to Revelation? Is there not a sense in which we've forgotten that God's primary vehicle for revelation is a story unfolded within the biblical canon?

By pointing to the fundamentally narrative basis of all knowledge, Lyotard reminds us about the ultimately narrative character of Christian faith. This resonates with postliberal theology (as found in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, for example), which emphasizes the narrative character of revelation.²⁴

Postliberals in general are fond of connecting the narrative shape of the kerygma (or of salvation history) with a narratological alethiology (= understanding of truth), as if chronological sequences of events are somehow better fitted for alethologies based on actuality in storytime than for those based on actuality in spacetime.²⁵ The problem, of course, is not only that the inference

²³ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁴ Ibid., 52.

²⁵ See the discussion in Watson, *Text and Truth*, 34-37. Watson unfortunately uses the term "narrative criticism" for what he should call "narrative theology." In keeping with earlier convention, "narrative criticism" should be reserved for an alethiologically equivocal method of looking at a work's literary designs. Watson's terminological confusion is shared by a number of British scholars, as can be seen in several of the essays in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). Postliberals are inconsistent as to whether the saving "narrative" is that of the kerygma or that of all of God's activity recorded in the Bible. This is a rather important issue, as it touches on some of what Smith charges against primitivism. Smith implies that primitivism dispenses with one of the four ecclesial *notae* of the Nicene Creed: "We might suggest that [primitivist] versions of Christianity are more interested in being 'holy' and 'apostolic' than in being 'catholic'—as if these traits could be separated" (*Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 132). But according to Avery Dulles, in instances where the usage is clear, "catholicity" (as conveyed by *katholikos*) was not understood in the sense of "communion with the Church spread over the whole world" until the time of the Donatist controversy (*The Catholicity of the Church* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 14). Until that time, it had more of a connotation of purity than of generous inclusion or ecclesial indefectibility. The only catholicity (of either sense) canonized within the NT is that which rests in the normativeness of the apostolic kerygma. On NT terms, the only reason there can be "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church" is that there was *first* "one holy, catholic, and apostolic" kerygma!

is logically bogus, but also that Paul's words in 1 Cor 15 leave no doubt that the understanding of truth on which the apostolic kerygma is based is one of actuality in *spacetime* (rather than actuality in *storytime*). When Paul writes, "If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor 15:14), he can only be predicating the salvific effect of his apostolic witness on the spacetime actuality of the Christ event. The storytime actuality of Christ's resurrection is simply the epistemic reflection of a prior ontic moment. In and of itself, it is really immaterial to the truth of Paul's gospel: even if everyone in Corinth accepted the narrative of the Christ event as determinative for his or her identity, the spacetime actuality of that event would still represent the *sine qua non* of the gospel's truth. Indeed, if the narrative of the Christ event were not actualized in spacetime, then, by Paul's account, those who embraced the kerygmatic narrative most fervently would be "of all men most to be pitied" (v. 19). In other words, Paul predicates the validity of the gospel upon ontic rather than epistemic questions. The deconstructionist bid (or habit) to elide the distinction between the ontic and epistemic orders not only violates the rules of reasoning, but it also undercuts the alethiological foundation of Paul's gospel.

If postliberals believe that the community is the arbiter of scriptural meaning, then how do they view the idea that one should read Scripture in light of what it meant to the early church, or that we should appeal to the early church's views as a criterion for doctrine? Smith rejects that idea outright, calling it "a quasi-Platonic, quasi-gnostic rejection of material history."²⁶ The charge, of course, does not fit: primitivism is not a "rejection of material history" (let alone "quasi-gnostic") any more than any other program of holding to original intentions might be. (Am I being "quasi-gnostic" or "rejecting material history" if I correct someone's misconstrual of something I said five years ago? Would it make a difference if the subject matter of what I said was theological, so that the question was one of the development of doctrine?) The primitivist hermeneutic simply rejects novelty in the name of a pristine state of affairs. Smith is also unfair when he writes that primitivists, by appealing solely to Christ and the apostles as norms for meaning and doctrine, are "retaining the most minimal commitment to God's action in history."²⁷ "History" for Smith evidently means something narrower than what the term usually means. (No one believes God has been more active in history than Pentecostals do, and yet their entire theology is based upon a primitivist ideal!) Smith apparently uses "history" to refer to the history of *ideas*,

²⁶ *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 128-29.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Smith thinks that primitivists stand in greater danger than traditionalists of falling into doctrinal error: "This primitivism opens up such evangelical traditions to any new wind of doctrine. The key is for such new doctrines to assert their first-century, primitive origins. So, for instance, the radically novel eschatology of dispensationalism could become the dominant orthodoxy in just half a century because it claimed biblical rather than traditional warrant" (129 n. 31). Smith never mentions any of the gross embellishments of doctrine fostered by traditionalism. Nor does he mention that a more effective primitivist program of study (such as that developed by historical criticism) would have put to rest the idea that the book of Revelation deals mostly with events still in the future, thus putting a hamper on mistaken eschatological speculation in a way traditionalism cannot do.

or, rather, the history of *religious* ideas.²⁸ (And given the postmodernist understanding of meaning traced by Smith, one wonders how God enters into the equation at all. If truth is simply identified as the meaning attributed by a community, then how could a community's understanding ever be wrong?)

III. Conclusion

Smith's new book is a useful introduction to postmodernist thinking and how it relates to theological issues. But in so being, it shows just how thoroughly postmodernism is riddled with rational blind spots and categorical errors. Smith charges that anti-postmodernism has based its understanding on a "bumper sticker" view of postmodernism, but that charge sounds hollow in light of how postliberals recast sociological understandings of the religious role of canon as *emic* Christian theologians. In spite of the book's goal, a careful reading of Smith's book reveals many reasons for Christians to be wary of postmodernism. The postmodernist understanding of truth and meaning truly is incompatible with the gospel of the NT.

²⁸ It should be noted that Smith's use of "history" is not at all unique among those arguing his position, e.g., the following is found in a report presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1947: "Protestantism has not really come to terms with the reality of history as the scene of the continuous presence of Divine life that flows from the Incarnation" (*Catholicity: A Study in the Conflict of Christian Traditions in the West* [London: Dacre, 1947] [quoted in Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 99]). Both Smith and the latter highlight the typical failure among traditionalists to differentiate between the divine presence and epistemic assurance, a failure typified in the medieval use of Jesus' words "Lo, I am with you always" as a slogan of ecclesial indefectibility (!), and one subtly reinforced in our own day by the soteriologizing of revelation within Barthian theology. Given that most postliberals identify the moving of the Spirit so closely with the church that pneumatology tends to be swallowed up by ecclesiology, one could easily turn Smith's "minimal commitment" charge around and ask why postliberals do not recognize God's activity in history outside the church. For a counterargument to the restriction of the Spirit to the church (from one somewhat friendly to postliberalism), see Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 236-40.