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# Deconstructing Evangelical Theology?

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# DECONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?

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Probably most evangelical theologians would be more inclined to defend, expand, and disseminate their theological convictions than to deconstruct them. The notion that their theology could be "deconstructed" may sound, to them, preposterous, even sacrilegious. As a methodological step, however, deconstruction is always necessary to understand revealed truths. In our postmodern times, "deconstruction" has become a synonym for "destruction." However, as I will explain later, in this article I will use the word "deconstruction" to name a critical method of analyzing and evaluating the presuppositions on which theological systems have been built. Though the deconstruction may be applied to all schools of Christian theology, in this article I will specifically apply it to evangelical theology.

This article suggests the possibility of analyzing evangelical theology[1] critically by deconstructing the theological system on which it stands. Though deconstruction can be applied to biblical interpretation and pastoral practices, in this article I am focusing on the deconstruction of Christian teachings that were constructed through the centuries by way of dogmatic or systematic theological thinking. Instead of facing the ever-increasing fragmentation of evangelical theology and its lack of relevance in the life of the church,[2] I suggest we take an honest, introspective look at our own thinking. Thus the aim of methodological deconstruction is not to destroy evangelical theology, but to open the way for new theological understandings and fresh discovery of truth.[3] This proposal may be especially helpful in a time when evangelical theology is going through a period of crisis and transition.[4]

My purpose is modest. I aim at presenting a preliminary outline of the

[1]Though in this article I discuss the program of theological deconstruction in concrete relation to American evangelicalism, deconstruction is required in all forms of evangelical theologies and schools of Christian theologies.

[2]On the lack of relevance of theology in our times, see, e.g., Millard J. Erickson, *Where Is Theology Going? Issues and Perspectives on the Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); and David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[3]For instance, Clark Pinnock is convinced that "there is always a place for asking questions and for challenging assumptions. Our God-talk is always open to re-evaluation because mistakes can be made and need correcting" (*Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2001], ix).

[4]For an introduction to the ongoing crisis and transition in evangelical theology, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 151-183.

main components calling for theological deconstruction.[5] To achieve this objective, we need to consider the postmodern context facing evangelical theology, the postmodern turn to hermeneutical reason, and the notions of hermeneutical principles and deconstruction. Then we must consider the philosophical origin of Christian hermeneutics and the concrete way in which the classical hermeneutical tradition interpreted the hermeneutical foundations of theology. At this point, we will examine the pivotal axis around which theological deconstruction revolves. This axis includes the philosophical deconstruction of the ontology on which Christian theology was constructed, the hermeneutical alternative that such deconstruction presents to evangelical theologians, and the forgotten temporal horizon from which biblical thinkers understood God's being and actions. Finally, from the evangelical affirmation of the *sola*, *tota*, and *prima Scriptura* principles we will consider the role Scripture plays in theological deconstruction in general, and specifically in the deconstruction of classical and modern macro hermeneutics, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and the historical-critical method.

### *Evangelical Theology and Postmodernity*

We do theology within a historical context. Here I will briefly consider the immediate intellectual context from within which deconstruction as theological procedure should be understood. Since the last decade of the twentieth century, our times have been consistently characterized as "postmodern." Although evangelical theologians consider postmodernism a "challenge," some see it in a more positive light than others.[6] Here I will refer to postmodernity not from the apologetical, but from the methodological perspective as the intellectual environment that facilitates the task of deconstruction.

Some years ago, Hans Küng realized that the word "postmodernity" is a label for an "epoch that upon closer inspection proves to have set in decades ago . . . and is now making broad inroads into the consciousness of the masses."[7] Briefly put, then, we can say that "postmodernity" is a cultural phenomenon taking place at the intellectual and social levels. Though the social level permeating American culture is of great importance for practical theology,

[5]Deconstructing Christian doctrines we have received by way of tradition will not be possible within the limits of this study.

[6] Under the title "Postconservative Evangelicalism," Gary Dorrien provides a survey of recent trends in constructive evangelical theology (*The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 185-209). A number of proposals on how to face postmodernity may be found in David S. Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); see also Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and idem, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

[7]Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 2.

our proposal naturally connects with the intellectual ground of postmodern times.[8]

Among others, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has influenced the evangelical understanding of postmodernism at the intellectual level. Lyotard used the word "postmodernity" to describe the "condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies."[9] In a small treatise, he presented postmodernity by reporting on the status of scientific knowledge at the end of the twentieth century. He took the word "postmodernity" from American sociologists and critics, who used it to designate "the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts."[10] We can say, then, that "postmodernity" is the broad cultural acceptance of the epistemological criticism of reason and the nature of scientific knowledge that took place during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. So far, however, evangelical theologians have related to postmodernity more as a sociocultural reality than as an intellectual phenomenon.

When seen from the cultural perspective, postmodernity's main "sin" is the denial of objective, absolute truth in favor of total scientific and cultural relativism.[11] According to Paul Lakeland, postmodernity "is deeply suspicious of notions of universal reason, and it rejects all metaphysical and religious foundations, all 'grand theory,' all theoretical systems."[12] Not surprisingly, the postmodern notion that texts are incapable of conveying meaning upsets biblical theologians.[13] Besides, most writers understand postmodernity as a continuity replacement of modernity. In a hidden way, modernity becomes the central and foundational formative period in Western philosophy and theology. Whatever is premodern[14] or precritical[15] is belittled. The realization that the postmodern turn implies a deconstruction of theological constructions based on premodern and modern ontologies and epistemologies seems to have not

[8]For an introduction to postmodernity, see Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); and Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

[9]Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), xxiii.

[10]Ibid.

[11]David S. Dockery, "The Challenge of Postmodernism," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 14. This implies a revolt against medieval and modern minds (Carl F. H. Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 40), the conviction that religion is a private affair (ibid., 41), and the rejection of foundationalism (ibid., 42).

[12]Lakeland, xii.

[13]Henry, 36.

[14]Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 32-52.

[15]Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 3-4.

yet dawned on most evangelical theologians.

Postmodernity affects Christianity in general and the evangelical theological community in particular for two primary reasons. First, because evangelicals preach the gospel to the world, any change in the world and its culture directly relates to its proclamation. If adjustments are not made, the church may find herself preaching to a nonexistent world. Second, because most theologians construct their views on the methodological assumption that besides Scripture other sources of cultural origination must be included, notably philosophy and, since the Enlightenment, the factual sciences. For instance, the postmodern reinterpretation of reason affects evangelical theology because during the twentieth century evangelical apologetics was constructed using the old—Enlightenment—rules of the game, which postmodernity has now changed.[16] However, the postmodern period is not the first time that philosophy has changed the rules of the game on Christian theologians. The period of Enlightenment, or the Modern age, produced the first epochal change. Much of Protestant and American evangelicalism came into existence during the modernist epoch and did not escape its influence.[17] Thus, in different and unique ways, the Enlightenment shaped Fundamentalism, Liberalism, and Neo-Orthodoxy.

Because in his *Report on Knowledge* Lyotard only described the status of scientific knowledge without discussing its epistemological and philosophical causes, postmodernity appears, to evangelical thinkers, to be another cultural paradigm shift to which we have to adjust when preaching and defending the gospel.[18] In this context, evangelical theologians have reacted to the challenge of postmodernity in various ways. Authors attempting to overcome the epistemological challenge presented by postmodernity emphasize one corner of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" of theological sources.[19] Thus, for instance, Thomas Oden works from tradition, Stanley Grenz from tradition and experience, Kelvin Jones from reason, and Millard Erickson from Scripture.

Oden and Grenz have produced the more nuanced proposals to date. Besides, they have developed systematic approaches to theology in concrete dialogue with postmodernity.[20] Their approaches center around and build upon

[16]See, e.g., Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 161.

[17]See Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 64-101.

[18]For instance, Grenz affirms that "Postmodernism refers to the intellectual mood and cultural expression that are becoming increasingly dominant in contemporary society. We are apparently moving into a new cultural epoch, postmodernity" (*A Primer on Postmodernism*, 13).

[19]For an introduction to the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," see Albert C. Outler, *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); and Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

[20]Thomas C. Oden, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987,

tradition. Having been a modernist theologian himself, Oden criticizes modernity and modern theology, sparing no words. According to him, to overcome modernity we should work "with" but not "within" the postmodern interpretation of historical reason,[21] and draw our hermeneutical directives from the consensus of early Christian tradition.[22] His proposal then calls for a "postmodern orthodoxy."[23] Grenz builds his approach to a postmodern evangelical systematic theology on tradition and experience. However, he emphasizes present tradition as it actually takes place in concrete communities of faith over the "Grand Tradition" emphasized by Oden, Alister McGrath,[24] and Carl Henry.[25] A third approach consists in canceling out postmodernity by reaffirming the objectivity of reason via classical philosophical thinking; at least this seems to be the suggestion of Kelvin Jones, who builds on Henry and Thomas Aquinas, who, in turn, built on Aristotle and Plato.[26] A fourth approach, advanced by Erickson, calls for critical evaluation, adaptation in the proclamation of the gospel message in order to be understood by postmodern persons,[27] and the need to accelerate the transition from postmodernity to "postpostmodernity."[28] Among several recommendations about how to accelerate this transition, Erickson suggests that we should become aware of our philosophical presuppositions and define them not from the philosophical supermarket as traditionally done, but from Scripture. He explains:

> We should seek to discern whether the Bible gives us a metaphysics, then check against it our own conceptions, correcting them to fit, then repeating the exegesis, again matching the results to our philosophy and continuing in this process. It is like adjusting an automobile compass. One does not attempt to

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1989, 1992); and Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994).

[21]Thomas C. Oden, ed., *The Living God* (New York: Harper and Collins, 1992), 375, 391; Kwabena Donkor, *Tradition, Method, and Contemporary Protestant Theology: An Analysis of Thomas C. Oden's Vincentian Method* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 84-87.

[22]Thomas C. Oden, *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 53.

[23]Thomas C. Oden, *Agenda for Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 30-31.

[24]Alister McGrath, "Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 139-158.

[25]Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" 50.

[26]Kelvin Jones, "The Formal Foundation: Toward an Evangelical Epistemology in the Postmodern Context," in *The Challenge of Postmodernity: An Evangelical Engagement*, ed. David S. Dockery (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 344-358.

[27]Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 307-308.

[28]Ibid., 325.

> eliminate the entire directional error in one step. Rather, one successively heads the car in each of the four primary directions, each time removing one half of the remaining compass error.[29]

The methodological, philosophical, and theological issues involved in this simple suggestion are momentous. Erickson is saying we should not take anything for granted in the area of philosophy. Philosophy changes too often to be a reliable ally. However, if we check our philosophical ideas from Scripture, we are *de facto* reinterpreting the hermeneutical foundations on which evangelical and Christian theologies were built. Emotionally, this is not easy to do because this process involves the deconstruction of evangelical theology that Erickson probably did not envision when he wrote this paragraph.[30]

The proposal for deconstructing evangelical theology not only takes place within a postmodern intellectual context, but it is also a way to overcome postmodernity theologically. Thus to understand theological deconstruction as methodology, we need to gain an appreciation of the philosophical nature of the postmodern turn, to grasp deconstruction as method, to realize that Christian theologies have been constructed on philosophical rather than biblical hermeneutical grounds, and to take heed of Erickson's momentous suggestion about the philosophical role of Scripture.

### *The Postmodern Turn: Hermeneutical Reason*

Arguably, postmodernity has a sociocultural manifestation and a philosophical base. While properly addressing postmodernity as cultural phenomenon, evangelical thought has neglected its philosophical base.[31] The generalized conviction is that something of paradigmatic proportions has shifted in our

[29]Ibid., 327.

[30]An example of its difficulty can be found in Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). On one hand, Lints affirms the hermeneutical role of the *sola Scriptura* principle in today's theology (290-292) and is convinced that we should relate cultural presuppositions to the principles of rationality that undergird the gospel (119). On the other hand, however, he fails to apply the hermeneutical role of Scripture to the philosophical foundations of Christian theology as Erickson suggests. This becomes evident when he divides rationality into two kinds, "cultural" and "native" (118). The former corresponds to the historical rationality of postmodernism, while the latter corresponds to the classical-modern understanding of reason as universal and objective. Finally, he grounds native rationality theologically on Calvin's view of God's nature and actions (125). In so doing, he does not apply the hermeneutical guidance of Scripture to the interpretation of reason. He applies a theological construction built on the hermeneutical guidance of neo-Platonic philosophical notions.

[31]The philosophical causes of postmodernity can be traced back to seventeenth-century English Empiricism. In the study of nature, empiricism led to the birth of the modern sciences, scientific positivism, analytical philosophy, and contemporary science. In the study of human beings, empiricism led to historicism, phenomenology, existentialism, general ontology, and hermeneutics. Familiarity with these developments may help us to understand postmodern philosophy.

culture. According to Lyotard's *Report on Knowledge*, we may perceive this "turn" in the status of scientific thinking. The so-called "postmodern turn" revolves around a new interpretation of reason. While modernism limited reason's reach from timeless to spatiotemporal objects, postmodernism limited reason's a priori from timeless-objective to temporal-historical categories. To put it simply, if modernity was the "age of absolute reason," postmodernity is the "age of hermeneutics." As modernity left behind the "pure" reason of classical times, postmodernity left behind the "absolute-scientificist" reason of modernity. Thus we find ourselves operating within the "hermeneutical" reason of postmodernity.[32]

Lyotard assumes this change has taken place and reports its results in the area of science with particular emphasis on the question of legitimation. "Legitimation" is the process by which a legislator or a scientist may promulgate a law as the norm for other human beings.[33] Classical and modern societies achieved legitimation through metaphysics. In the postmodern condition, where metaphysics and metanarratives are no longer credible sources of legitimation,[34] "who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?"[35] The question, then, is not about objectivity, but about universality and authority. In Lyotard's mind, this question is connected to the power some human beings exercise upon others.

Under the influence of Lyotard and Richard Rorty, evangelical theologians encounter postmodernity as an intellectual phenomenon that revolves around a reinterpretation of reason. Specifically, postmodernity is the "*turn*" from absolute to hermeneutical reason. Yet, what is hermeneutical reason? David Tracy encapsulated the notion of hermeneutical reason by saying "to understand at all is to interpret."[36] To interpret means that not only the object of knowledge but

[32]"Pure" reason is an obvious reference to Kant's criticism of knowledge. "Scientificist," which was an outcome of Kant's criticism, is a reference to what we contemporarily refer to as "science," that is, knowledge based on empirical evidence and experimental methodology.

[33]Lyotard, 8-9.

[34]Ibid., xxiii-xxiv.

[35]Ibid., 9.

[36]David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 9. The entire quotation is enlightening. "Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret. To act well is to interpret a situation demanding some action and to interpret a correct strategy for that action. To experience in other than a purely passive sense (a sense less than human) is to interpret; and to be 'experienced' is to have become a good interpreter. Interpretation is thus a question as unavoidable, finally, as experience, understanding, deliberation, judgment, decision, and action. To be human is to act reflectively, to decide deliberately, to understand intelligently, to experience fully. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter."

also the cognitive subject contribute to the formation of knowledge.[37] If this is true, to know is to construct. Our knowledge, then, is not passively shaped by objects (as in realism and positivism), nor is it a projection of our imagination (such as in idealism and cultural postmodernity), but results from an interaction between subject and object. Native to hermeneutical reason is the temporal historicity of the categories it uses for constructing meanings and judgments. Briefly put, the categories or presuppositions necessary to interpret, evaluate, and judge are not innate or divinely infused but acquired from experience. That is why postmodern hermeneutical reason lacks universality, not objectivity. The notion that postmodern philosophy calls for unbridled subjectivism is unwarranted.[38] At least the paradigmatic changes in philosophy that took place in the last century do not point in this direction. Overstatements in this respect might have to be eventually adjusted.

Acquaintance with the hermeneutical function of the human mind may help Christian theologians to better understand why their interpretations of the biblical text and doctrinal constructions conflict and figure out ways to overcome them.[39] To understand the postmodern turn we need to introduce ourselves to the basic structure of interpreting interpretation.[40] Specifically, we need to become aware of the basic principles involved in the act of theological interpretation.

### *Hermeneutical Principles*

Philosophical hermeneutics originated recently as the philosophical discipline dedicated to the investigation of the act of interpretation.[41] During the twentieth century, Hans-Georg Gadamer studied in depth the act of interpretation.[42] In this

[37]Nicolai Hartmann, *Grundzüge einer metaphysic der Erkenntis* (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1941), 1.5.a.1; cf. 5.1.1.a.

[38]This misunderstanding and overstatement of postmodernity is properly corrected by James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000). Smith, 163, notes that to "say that everything is interpretation is not to say that all is *arbitrary*. Or, in other words, to emphasize that understanding is relative to one's situationality is not to espouse a *relativism* (which is largely understood as arbitrariness)" (emphasis original).

[39]Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Pattern of Evangelical Theology: Hommage À Ramm," in *The Evangelical Heritage: A Study in Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), xiii-xvii. Pinnock, 10-18, uncovers deep divisions within evangelical theology.

[40]Smith, 19-25.

[41]For an introduction to the notion and origin of hermeneutics as philosophical discipline, see Raül Kerbs, "Sobre el desarrollo de la hermenéutica," *Analogia Filosófica*, 2 (1999): 3-33.

[42]Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989); see also idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Less known, but equally relevant, is the work of Italian philosopher Emilio Betti,

article, we need only to underline the basic structural fact that interpretation always flows from presuppositions we bring to bear on what we know or study. The existence and operation of presuppositions in the act of human knowledge was already recognized by Plato's notion that to know is to remember. It is the presence and application of presuppositions in the formation of human knowledge that makes knowledge an interpretation, or construction. It is necessary, then, to identify the presuppositions that are always involved when Christian theologians construct their interpretations and doctrines.

Speaking generally, the sum total of the personal experiences we bring to the act of knowledge can be classified as presuppositions. However, as presuppositions, not all experiences have the same reach or role. Consequently, in this study, I will concentrate on a specific group of specialized presuppositions that I will call "hermeneutical presuppositions or principles." They are the general conditions involved in the interpretation of theological data and realities. When we look at them from the interpretations they helped to create, they appear to us as "presuppositions." In the task of doing theology, we call them "principles" because they initiate and condition the entire theological task.

Classical and modern philosophers were convinced that our thinking was conditioned by a set of hermeneutical principles somehow built into human nature. To put it simply, as all human beings by nature have, say, a brain, eyes, and legs, they also have the same hermeneutical principles or presuppositions. While postmodernity accepts the presence and role of hermeneutical principles in the generation of human knowledge, it no longer adjudicates their origin to our common human nature. On the contrary, hermeneutical principles originate from temporal-historical experiences, are stored in our minds, and then are used as parameters to interpret fresh events. If this is so, then we all generate or construct knowledge from difference experiences and, in Christian theology, from different hermeneutical principles. In conclusion, we should not confuse hermeneutical principles with the sum total of our experience. In Christian theology, hermeneutical principles or presuppositions differ from the rest of our cultural presuppositions because of their broad reach and all-inclusive interpretive influence.

Briefly put, hermeneutical principles are a tightly interrelated ensemble of overarching general notions that, because of their all-inclusiveness, condition the entire range of Christian thinking. There are different kinds of hermeneutical principles, according to the realm to which they belong. Thus, to borrow Küng's language, we can speak of macro-, meso-, and micro-

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"Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*," in *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); and idem, *Teoria Generale della Interpretzione* (Milano: Dott A. Giuffre Editore, 1990). For an introduction to philosophical hermeneutics, see Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

hermeneutical principles.[43] From macro-hermeneutical principles, which some theologians draw from philosophy but most assume from tradition, we move to the meso-hermeneutical principles used to conceive, formulate, and understand Christian doctrines, and to the micro-hermeneutical principles used to interpret the text of Scripture. The interpretive force moves from macro- to micro-hermeneutics. Thus, for instance, when interpreting a text from Paul's Epistle to the Romans, we apply our macro- and meso-hermeneutical presuppositions consciously or unconsciously acquired from or belonging to a specific theological tradition.[44] For this reason, in this article we will concentrate on the interpretation and role of the macro-hermeneutical principles of theology.

Since theology deals with God, human beings, and creation, theologians always assume ideas about these realities. Besides, they also presuppose an interpretation of human reason, including epistemology, hermeneutics, theological, and exegetical methodologies, and the origin of theological knowledge (revelation-inspiration). Thus in every biblical interpretation, theological construction, and practical application, we find the presence and operation of a few, but very influential, macro-hermeneutical principles. They are principles about reality, including understanding about Being (general ontology), God (theology proper), human nature (anthropology), world (cosmology), and reality as a whole (metaphysics),[45] and principles about human knowledge, including understanding about hermeneutics, revelation-inspiration, and theological method.

### *Deconstruction*

Deconstruction as critical method should not be confused or identified with deconstructionism. Deconstructionism corresponds to what Erickson, following David Griffin, calls "deconstructive postmodernism,"[46] of which Mark C. Taylor is a fitting example.[47] Deconstructionism is the constructive

[43]Küng, 134, uses the "macro, meso, and micro" categorization to speak about the scientific paradigm in theology.

[44]This results from the historical structure of our beings, which Gadamer, 294-295, describes as "belonging."

[45]Throughout the history of Western philosophy, ontology and metaphysics have been used interchangeably. I am using the word "metaphysics" here only to refer to the articulation or understanding of reality as a whole, that is to say, to the relationship between the parts and the whole. On this issue, see, e.g., Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 130-152; and Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

[46]Millard Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 99-103; and D. R. Griffin, W. Beardslee, and J. Holland, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 1-7.

[47]Mark C. Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982); and idem,

attempt to talk about God from within the context of our secular relativistic postmodern culture and in a nontheological form.[48] Deconstruction is a critical reading of interpretive and systematic traditions.

Deconstruction is not a new phenomenon. Jesus (Matt 15:2-6; Mark 7:1-13) and Luther[49] used deconstruction effectively and properly. Deconstruction, however, has not been a prominent feature in the practice of theological method because of the importance of theological traditions.[50] This situation may be explained, in some degree, by the fact that it is difficult to criticize the ground on which one stands. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, deconstruction has become prominent as a methodological feature of postmodern philosophy. Before we can think of applying deconstruction to evangelical theology we need to become aware of the way in which deconstruction is understood in the postmodern context.

By the end of the sixties, French philosopher Jacques Derrida employed the term "deconstruction" to describe his method of literary and philosophical criticism.[51] We do not need to deal with Derrida's deconstruction in detail here. Only a brief reference to his understanding of deconstruction will help us to understand the sense in which I use the term "deconstruction" in this article.

John Caputo, who has done a remarkable job introducing Derrida's thought to American readers, tells us that Derrida's deconstruction is textual, "transgressive," and messianic. It is textual because it concentrates on classical texts and uses linguistic procedures.[52] It is "transgressive" because it reads classical texts in dissonance with or transgressing favorite interpretive traditions.[53] Finally, Derrida's deconstruction is messianic—it has a positive side—because opening itself to an absolute future allows for a reinvention of

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*Erring: A Postmodern Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[48]Taylor, *Deconstructing Theology*, xi.

[49]Smith, 109-110.

[50]This may be explained in part by the fact that, explicitly or implicitly, tradition plays an authoritative role very close to the role of biblical revelation. See, e.g., Dulles, 103-104.

[51]John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 77.

[52]This becomes apparent when we consider Caputo's example of deconstruction. The text is a passage of Plato's *Timeaus*, where Derrida focuses on the spatial receptacle (*Khôra*), in which the Demiurge generates the sensory copies of the intelligible ideas. This allows Derrida to distinguish between the Platonic text and Platonic philosophy and to use the former to criticize the latter (ibid., 82-92). Thus Derrida's analysis of Plato's text becomes "transgressive" of Platonism as philosophical tradition.

[53]Jacques Derrida's "transgression" corresponds to Thomas S. Kuhn's "anomalies" in normal science. It magnifies that which does not fit the interpretative criteria of "normal science" or accepted paradigm (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], 52).

religion.[54] Of course, Derrida has in mind a secular kind of religion based on human faith (experience), not on divine revelation in history (Scripture).

Derrida's deconstruction, however, is less revolutionary than Martin Heidegger's. Hans-Georg Gadamer underlined the revolutionary nature of Heidegger's approach by saying that he "changed the philosophical consciousness of time with one stroke. Heidegger unleashed a critique of cultural idealism that reached a wide public—a destruction of the dominant philosophical tradition—and a swirl of radical questions."[55] Moreover, "the brilliant scheme of *Being and Time* meant a total transformation of the intellectual climate, a transformation that had lasting effects on almost all the sciences."[56] Why was Heidegger's thought so revolutionary? One reason might be that he not only criticized the hermeneutical foundations on which classical and modern philosophy were built, but also replaced them with something very different.

The deconstruction I am proposing, then, is not negative deconstructionism, but a critical instrument to open the way for new theological constructions. The question is whether evangelical theology needs a new theological formulation. After all, doesn't evangelical theology contain the gospel? That may very well be so; yet, in the midst of evangelicalism we find theological fragmentation and conflicting positions.[57] Moreover, as we have seen above, evangelical theologians are presently involved in rethinking evangelical theology in dialogue with the postmodern context.[58] Yet, they continue the old practice of remodeling old houses without considering building new ones. As methodological-theological procedure, deconstruction is necessary to open a way through the maze of philosophical and theological interpretations facing theologians at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The hope is that its application is pursued as a critical instrument necessary to open the intellectual space where theologians could build their theologies from Scripture.

Protestant theology came into existence because the great Reformers Luther and Calvin relentlessly deconstructed the salvation-by-works system favored by Catholic theology. They deconstructed it from what Scripture says, just as Derrida deconstructs Platonism from what Plato's classical texts say. However, the Reformers did not deconstruct the hermeneutical foundation of classical theology. They constructed their theological understanding of the biblical truth about justification by faith from the classical system of macro-hermeneutics operative in Roman Catholic theology. In this way, the positive religious change obtained by their labors was clouded by a macro hermeneutics

[54]Ibid., 159.

[55]Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Phenomenological Movement," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976), 138.

[56]Ibid., 138-139.

[57]Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 4-11; see also Vanhoozer, xv.

[58]For an introduction to ongoing theological constructions in evangelicalism, see, e.g., Dorrien, 185-209.

that distorted the content of biblical revelation. In time, these principles precipitated the modernist approach to theology and, in our days, the need to adjust the gospel to postmodern culture.

Deconstruction is also necessary to dispel the illusion that evangelical theology is biblical in a different, more foundational sense than Roman Catholic or Modern theologies. Regular members of the church are under this illusion. Theologians know better. They know that evangelical theology cannot stand on Scripture alone, but also requires the macro-hermeneutical help of classical philosophy.[59] To properly understand the task of deconstruction, then, we need to become aware of both the philosophical origin of Christian hermeneutics and the philosophical deconstruction of the philosophy used in its construction.

### *Philosophical Origin of Christian Hermeneutics*

As we saw in the section "Hermeneutical Principles," the macro-hermeneutical principles operative in Christian theology include the interpretation of the following key issues or realities: Being, God, human nature, world, totality as a whole, human knowledge, hermeneutics, methodology, and revelation-inspiration. All of these, except for revelation-inspiration, have been studied traditionally by philosophical disciplines, such as general and regional ontologies, philosophical theology, anthropology, cosmology, metaphysics, epistemology, and hermeneutics.

Most evangelical theologians use philosophy in an intuitive rather than intentional fashion. In general, they minimize the role of philosophy in their theologies as playing only a subordinated instrumental role necessary to "facilitate" the proclamation of the gospel.[60] To avoid the ever-present danger that philosophy may rule over theology, some theologians advise using philosophy occasionally, while avoiding adherence to a single philosophical system.[61] In spite of this advice, the hermeneutical influence of philosophical, ontological, and epistemological theories has played a leading role in the construction of Christian theology, including the understanding of the gospel.

Thomas Aquinas developed the macro-hermeneutical principles from which he wrote his massive and influential *Summa Theologica*[62] in a small booklet entitled *On Being and Essence*.[63] There, he adapted Aristotle's ontological and

[59]This dependence becomes apparent when theologians refuse to let go of the multiplex of theological sources gathered under the umbrella of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

[60]See, e.g., Pinnock, 22-23.

[61]Richard Rice, *Reason and the Contours of Faith* (Riverside, CA: La Sierra University Press, 1991), 201.

[62]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 3 vols. (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947).

[63]Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Garden City Press, 1949).

epistemological insights into a macro-hermeneutical grid from which to do Christian theology. Unfortunately, most theologians are not so explicit in uncovering their macro-hermeneutical presuppositions or the way in which they use philosophical insights in theology. For instance, Calvin did not explain in detail the way in which his theological construction consciously or unconsciously depended on hermeneutical principles derived from philosophical teachings. An analysis of his writings, however, uncovers his dependence on Augustine for theological guidance, especially in the doctrine of predestination.[64] And we know that Augustine's doctrine of predestination flows from his neo-Platonic macro hermeneutics, in particular his timeless understanding of God's being and the human soul.[65] Thus many doctrines that appear to be "biblical" are interpretations or constructions made with biblical materials from a philosophical, nonbiblical base.

### *Classical Theological Hermeneutics*

Christian theology needs deconstruction because it was constructed under the guidance of philosophical ideas that took over the hermeneutical role that properly belongs to divine revelation. Anticipating this danger, Paul warned Christ's followers to be on guard so "that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:8, RSV). Christ himself rebuked church leaders because they made void the word of God through their tradition (Mark 7:13; Matt 15:1-3). In spite of these clear warnings, early Christian theologians began to use Greek ontological insights as macro-hermeneutical presuppositions from which to build their theologies. Unfortunately, what Paul was afraid of and Christ condemned was the source that shaped the hermeneutical principles used in the constructions of classical Christian theology. Thus what Heidegger characterized as the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics was replicated in the onto-theo-logical construction of theology.[66] This means that theology was constructed from the hermeneutical basis of Greek ontology (*onto*) that defined the meaning of God's being (*theo*), and from it the interpretation of Christian doctrines as *logia*. This structure defines the hermeneutical structure of Christian and evangelical theologies.

Very early in church history, theologians began to draw their hermeneutical

[64]François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), 124-125.

[65]Augustine derived his timeless understanding of God not from Scripture, but from Parmenides's interpretation of Being. Since the timelessness of God's being determines the way in which his will acts, it also determines the understanding of divine predestination and, through it, the gospel. On the timelessness of God in Augustine, see, e.g., *Confessions*, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City: Image, 1960), chap. 11; on the timelessness of God's will, see chaps. 12, 15, 18.

[66]Martin Heidegger, "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphyics," in *Identity and Difference*, ed. John Sambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 54, 60.

perspectives not from Scripture, but from Greek philosophy: "In the conversation between the initial (Palestinian-Jewish) Christian formulation and its new Hellenistic environment, both partners changed. Neither lost its soul. Something new emerged."[67] What emerged was classical Christian theology. The intermingling between philosophy and theology took place at a level so deep that most of what we today know as Christianity does not correspond to biblical thinking. This fateful alliance brought theologians to the conviction that theology has a diversity of sources, notably, Scripture, tradition, reason (philosophy, science, culture), and experience. Even today we can trace the reasons for the differences between theological projects of various denominations back to the hermeneutical principles they work from and the source from which these principles have been derived.

Dependence on Greek ontology brought about two paradigmatic changes at the macro-hermeneutical level. The conviction that neo-Platonism properly described the nature of reality led Christian theologians to adopt its views on God's being and human nature for theological use. Thus the "onto-theological" movement as the basis of the constitution of Christian tradition began. The notions that God's being and the human soul are not temporal but timeless realities became hermeneutical guides in the construction of Christian theology. They played a decisive macro-hermeneutical role in the interpretation of Scripture (micro hermeneutics) and the construction of Christian doctrines (meso hermeneutics). They also led in the interpretation, formulation, and application of the theological method.[68]

The philosophical and scientific base from which Christian theology has been defined in hermeneutical approaches largely accounts for modern and postmodern theological fragmentation. Since consciously or unconsciously Christian theologians derive their hermeneutical approaches from philosophy and science, changes in philosophy and/or science unavoidably call for change in the hermeneutical approach and in the formulation of doctrines.

Modern theologians openly derive their macro-hermeneutical views from modern and postmodern science and philosophy. They cannot accept biblical views that do not fit their intellectual and moral preferences.[69] Though in theory, classical, modern, and postmodern theologies could deconstruct their

[67]Jack A. Bonsor, *Athens and Jerusalem: The Role of Philosophy in Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 26. Defining theological hermeneutics from philosophy was not an unknown procedure. Philo had already used it in his construction of Jewish theology. That philosophy and science determine the hermeneutical perspective from which Christian theology was constructed is a fact broadly accepted and methodologically defended by most theological traditions. For a technical introduction to the hermeneutical role that philosophy has played and continues to play in Christian theology, see Bonsor.

[68]Fernando Canale, "Interdisciplinary Method in Christian Theology? In Search of a Working Proposal," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 43/3 (2001): 366-389.

[69]Dorrien, 187.

views, they will not apply it to the macro-hermeneutical level on which their views stand. After all, they cannot reject the ground that allows them freedom to reconstruct theology every few years. Those who work along these lines seem to have forgotten Christ's closing remarks in his Sermon on the Mount when he clearly warned that "Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it" (Matt 7:26-27, RSV).

Most conservative Protestant and evangelical theologians honestly believe their theologies flow from biblical macro-hermeneutical principles. They affirm the primacy of Scripture in its hermeneutic, doctrinal, and critical functions. A critical analysis of their teachings, however, reveals that even conservative evangelical theologians build their doctrines on classical macro- and meso-hermeneutical principles.[70] Perhaps evangelical theologians who take Scripture seriously might be willing to deconstruct their own traditions to free Christian theology from the long centuries of hermeneutical bondage under science and philosophy. Perhaps they could understand that the painful deconstruction of cherished ideas is the condition necessary for letting God's word be heard anew in our postmodern context.

In short, that Christian thinkers constructed (interpreted, formulated)

[70]A recent example of this situation can be found in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1994). Although Grudem, 21, defines the task of systematic theology as the investigation about what the whole Bible teaches us today on any given topic, he, 168-171, assumes the interpretation of God's Being according to classical timeless ontology. Interestingly, all the biblical evidence he gives actually teaches the temporality of God. Yet, as is customary, he uses texts that show God's temporality to affirm his timelessness. This reveals he unconsciously works from classical macro-hermeneutical presuppositions. Surprisingly, he, 169, grounds divine timelessness, not from tradition or Greek philosophy, but by inferring it from scientific knowledge: "The study of physics tells us that matter and time and space must all occur together: if there is no matter, there can be no space or time either. Thus, before God created the universe, there was not 'time,' at least not in the sense of a succession of moments one after another." Though Grudem's reasoning is correct, the truth he is affirming is taught in Scripture (1 Cor 2:7) and does not imply the timelessness of God's being. That he brings timelessness from outside Scripture becomes clear from his analysis of 2 Pet 3:8. Grudem, 170, correctly sees the text as revealing God's experience of time. Yet he hastens to qualify his biblical analysis by saying that "God's experience of time is not just a patient endurance through eons of endless duration, but he has a *qualitatively different* experience of time than we do. This is consistent with the idea that in his own being, God is timeless; he does not experience a succession of moments. This has been the dominant view of Christian orthodoxy through the history of the church, though it has been frequently challenged, and even today many theologians deny it." Thus timelessness enters through the back door of tradition. Because Grudem works from classical, nonbiblical, macro-hermeneutical presuppositions, he cannot perceive the contradiction between the biblical understanding of God's relation to created time and classical Greek ontological timelessness.

classical theology under the hermeneutical direction of Greek ontology is an undisputed historical fact. Without changing the hermeneutical perspective adopted from Greek ontology, modern theologians constructed the modern project of theology on the hermeneutical roots of modern epistemology. At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, philosophers have replaced epistemology with hermeneutics.[71] Not surprisingly, we find evangelical theologians "reconstructing" evangelical theology from a macro-hermeneutical perspective that includes the ontological guidance of classical philosophy, the epistemological insights of modernity, and the hermeneutical criticism of postmodernity.[72]

### *The Philosophical Deconstruction of Classical Ontology*

We have arrived at a pivotal point in our presentation. Unfortunately, next to the grounding macro-hermeneutical role that ontology has in evangelical theology we find evangelical forgetfulness about it. There are some reasons that may shed light on this fateful forgetfulness. First, the constructors of evangelical theology did not speak about "ontology" or "ontological" issues. The operative notion is that if Luther and Calvin were able to do theology by going directly to Scripture and tradition *without* depending on ontological insights, contemporary evangelical theologians should be able to do the same. Second, as a movement American evangelicalism came into existence in modern times when a new emphasis on epistemology pushed ontology aside. Since René Descartes, philosophers endeavored to ground philosophy on epistemological terrain. Philosophical emphasis turned away from the study of reality (ontology) to the study of the cognitive foundations on which philosophy and science build their teachings (epistemology). Thus ontology receded from the limelight and theologians became more conversant with epistemological issues and the demands of modern scientific reason. This modern "turn to the subject" still hovers large over postmodernity. A third reason may be that Lyotard's and Rorty's influential accounts of postmodernity work within the epistemological-hermeneutical divide oblivious of ontological issues.[73]

However, while this debate was taking place on the English-speaking side of the philosophical world, continental philosophy approached the same epistemological-hermeneutical divide in close association with groundbreaking

[71]Richard Rorty's characterization of postmodernity as the movement from epistemology to hermeneutics may seem forced, yet it communicates with clarity the radical change postmodern philosophers have introduced in their interpretation of human knowledge (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 2d ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], 315-356).

[72]This takes place notably in the theological projects of Oden and Grenz.

[73]Fernando Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration: Searching for the Cognitive Foundations of Christian Theology in a Postmodern World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001), 17-19.

progress in ontological reflection. After all, reason's structure is unavoidably linked to our understanding of reality.[74] American philosophers' primary concentration on epistemological issues has almost concealed from evangelical theologians the paradigmatic ontological change that accompanies the postmodern turn to hermeneutical reason.[75]

Heidegger set the ontological interpretation on which postmodern hermeneutical reason stands. In so doing, he has implicitly shown that postmodernity is not a partial departure from some features of modern thinking, but a radical departure from the intellectual paradigm that has defined Western philosophy and culture since Parmenides's times. Here I will point to the change in a simple and concise manner. In so doing, my purpose is to show that Christian theology cannot keep building on tradition without first deconstructing its hermeneutical foundations.

Heidegger deconstructed not only modern but also classical philosophical traditions. He accomplished that by purposely focusing on the notion of Being, the most general of all human concepts. His epoch-making *Being and Time* begins by doubting that philosophy had properly understood the notion of Being and suggesting that we should attempt to understand it from a temporal perspective.[76] As far as I know, Heidegger never claimed he was turning more than two millennia of philosophical tradition upside down. However, this is, in fact, what his thought accomplished.[77] Yet it seems he was not totally aware of the radical nature of his ontological proposal.

In what did Heidegger's paradigmatic shift in ontological interpretation reside? First, he dealt with Being, not with beings. That is, he worked in the field of general rather than regional ontology. Thus he did not try to understand

[74]Parmenides seems to have been the first to recognize this linkage when he affirmed, "it is the same thing to think and to be" ("The Way to Truth," in *Ancilla to the pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Kathleen Freeman [Oxford: Blackwell, 1948], 42).

[75]I say "almost" because ontological studies are present in the work of American philosophers Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929); and Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948). Though some could argue that Whitehead's and Hartshorne's neoclassical philosophical constructions are "postmodern," others could find reasons to see them as modern philosophers. The less critical and more constructive work does not advance along the lines of Rorty's replacement of epistemology by hermeneutics.

[76]Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Collins, 1962), 1.

[77]Heidegger characterized traditional ontology not as being wrong, but euphemistically as being "forgetful." As with all philosophers, he felt his work was completing philosophy by working in what tradition had forgotten. Because of this forgetfulness, the traditional understanding of Being stands in need of radical correction. In this way, Heidegger seems to suggest that his interpretation of Being stands beyond the relativism that its hermeneutical adoption has triggered in the postmodern sciences.

only concrete entities (such as God, man, cosmos, substance), but also Being. At least in *Being and Time*, he explicitly set up the understanding of Being as his ultimate goal.[78] Since Aristotle, Being has been recognized to be the most general notion the human mind is capable of conceiving. This means that "Being cannot indeed be conceived as an entity," nor can it "be derived from higher concepts by definition."[79] By selecting Being as his object of study, Heidegger placed his quest at the spring from which everything else flows in philosophical thinking. This is because, in its all-inclusive generality, "an understanding of Being is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends in entities."[80] We can better appreciate the far-reaching consequences that the interpretation of Being has for the human sciences when Heidegger unpacks its macro-hermeneutical role:

> The question of Being aims therefore at ascertaining the *a priori* conditions not only for the possibility of the sciences which examine entities as entities of such and such a type, and, in so doing, already operate with an understanding of Being, but also for the possibility of those ontologies themselves which are prior to the ontical sciences and which provide their foundations.[81]

The interpretation of Being, then, influences the interpretation of the entire span of human knowledge and, of course, the interpretation of Scripture. Aquinas helps us to appreciate the overarching implications that any change in the interpretation of Being unleashes in any construction of theology by saying that "a small error at the outset can lead to great errors in the final conclusions."[82] Hermeneutically speaking, at the "beginning" we find the concept of Being, which as all-inclusive macro-hermeneutical principle, conditions the understanding of all other macro-hermeneutical presuppositions. In other words, our consciously or unconsciously assumed understanding of Being shapes our interpretation of the other macro-hermeneutical principles, which include God, human nature, the whole-part totality, cosmology, reason, interpretation, methodology, and revelation-inspiration. Even when theologians may not be aware of the question of Being or its interpretation, their understanding of the other macro-hermeneutical presuppositions guiding their theologies necessarily assumes an understanding of Being.

However, the study of being is only the *place* where Heidegger's philosophical revolution took place. The revolution consists in his decision to understand Being from the horizon of time.[83] In *Being and Time*, his aim was to

[78]Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Intro. 1.1.

[79]Ibid., Intro. 1.1.1-2.

[80]Ibid., Intro. 1.1.1.

[81]Ibid., Intro. 1.3.

[82]Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, 1; Aristotle, *On the Heavens*, 1, 5; 271b, 8.

[83]Heidegger announces in his preface to *Being and Time*: "Our aim in the following treatise is to work out the question of the meaning of *Being* and to do so concretely. Our

interpret the meaning of time and to use it as horizon for understanding Being.[84] In so doing, Heidegger found himself at the climax of the long process through which the classical ontological-epistemological system was being deconstructed. The starting point of this process may be traced back to the English Empiricists. The outcome of this movement is postmodernity. Heidegger's contribution was to perceive the epochal change in philosophical perspective that resulted from centuries of dissatisfaction with the classical philosophical paradigm and to adopt a new interpretation of Being as the ground from which all philosophical, scientific, and theological discourse is conceived and formulated. In sum, he dared to change the understanding of the broadest, most inclusive macro-hermeneutical principle.

Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions may help us understand Heidegger's philosophical revolution.[85] What we witness in and around Heidegger's thought is a paradigm shift of gigantic proportions. In a process that took many centuries, philosophers became increasingly aware that the classical Parmenidean-Platonic-Aristotelic paradigm (normal science) was not able to explain satisfactorily all the data they were supposed to explain. Little by little, time was introduced as the perspective from which to interpret traditional philosophical issues. Heidegger installed that perspective in the philosophical "most holy place," namely, in the understanding of Being. In so doing, he was, in fact, formulating with technical precision the basis for a new philosophical understanding of ontology. Based on previous deconstructive-constructive attempts made, notably, by Locke, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Husserl, Heidegger had enough background to formulate the shift from the classical paradigm to the postmodern one at the ontological level. Concretely, when Heidegger dogmatically decided to understand Being from the horizon of time, he was, in fact, replacing the classical paradigm that had, since Parmenides, approached the understanding of Being and beings from the horizon of timelessness.[86]

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provisional aim is the Interpretation of *time* as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being." In n. 4 of the preface, the translators explain the meaning of the word "horizon": "We tend to think of a horizon as something which we may widen or extend or go beyond; Heidegger, however, seems to think of it rather as something which we can neither widen nor go beyond, but which provides the limits for certain intellectual activities performed 'within' it."

[84]As it happened, Heidegger never dealt with the question of Being in *Being and Time*. Rather, he addressed it in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

[85]See Kuhn.

[86]When seen from this perspective, modernity appears to be a transitional stage. The state of uncertainty at the beginning of the twenty-first century that we have labeled "postmodernity" appears to be the result of a lack of working consensus in "normal science." Yet the temporal-historical, macro-ontological-hermeneutical perspective from which to work out a new "normal science" consensus paradigm is

### *The Hermeneutical Alternative*

Since Christian theological traditions were built under the macro-hermeneutical guidance of classical ontology, we should consider the consequences that the paradigmatic shift in ontological perspective formulated by Heidegger has for the task of doing evangelical theology in the twenty-first century.

For a number of reasons that we cannot enumerate in this article, evangelical theologians have not followed the postmodern shift at the ontological level as closely as they have followed its epistemological and cultural consequences. As it is currently perceived, the postmodern shift from epistemological to hermeneutical reason only prevents evangelical theologians from making absolute and universal rational statements. The postmodern shift from a timeless to a temporal approach to ontology, however, has deeper repercussions. One of them is that in the timeless approach, theological deconstruction is not necessary, while in the temporal approach it becomes unavoidable.

Let us review some facts that lead to the need to deconstruct evangelical theology. First, the most universal and all-inclusive of all hermeneutical principles is the concept of Being.[87] Second, Parmenides originated the classical tradition that interprets Being from a timeless horizon.[88] Third, when Plato and Aristotle decided to build their ontologies from the timeless horizon suggested by Parmenides, Western philosophy fixed the macro-hermeneutical direction from which classical and modern philosophies and theologies would be constructed.[89] Fourth, classical Christian theology sealed its intellectual destiny when Justin Martyr (implicitly) and Origen and Augustine (explicitly) interpreted God and human nature as nontemporal and nonhistorical from within the Platonic ontological tradition. This decision defined the macro-hermeneutical principles for classical, modern, and evangelical theologies.[90] Fifth, as a culmination of a long process of deconstruction, the undisputed reign of the classical philosophical synthesis came to an end when Heidegger convincingly argued that Being can also be interpreted from a temporal

already beginning to sit deep in the consciousness of Western philosophy and scholarship. Achieving this might take several generations, even centuries.

[87]Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XI, 3.

[88]Parmenides, 7-8; Fernando Luis Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1983), 76-114.

[89]Plato, *Timaeus*, 37.d-38.c. Heidegger recognized their paradigmatic influence by saying that "what these two men [Plato and Aristotle] achieved was to persist through many alterations and 'retouchings' down to the 'logic' of Hegel" (*Being and Time*, Intro. 1.1).

[90]Modern macro hermeneutics modifies classical macro hermeneutics only in its epistemological component; it is a modification associated with the temporal-spatial limits Kant set on pure (classical) reason (Immaneul Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn [Buffalo: Prometheus, 1990], intro. to "Transcendental Aesthetics").

horizon. Apparently, Heidegger's approach stands at the antipode of Parmenides's. Sixth, therefore philosophy and theology face a primordial alternative at the most inclusive or deepest macro-hermeneutical level. The unavoidable question arises: Should philosophers and theologians approach the understanding of Being and beings from a timeless or a temporal horizon?

Unfortunately, the movement from classical to hermeneutical reason has shown convincingly that reason cannot decide among commensurable conflicting interpretive options with absolute certainty. At the primordial macro-hermeneutical level—where the horizon for understanding Being, and through it everything else within the reach of human knowledge, is located—philosophical reason cannot ground an absolutely certain decision. Nevertheless, choose we must, even if only by default, otherwise our reason would not be able to function properly. Since reason cannot help us to decide, we must seek guidance from the sources of theology.

If modern and postmodern deconstruction-construction disqualified reason to help us make this grounding macro-hermeneutical decision, the next obvious choice is to decide from the perspective of tradition. It is through tradition that Oden's postmodern orthodoxy and Grenz's "theology from the community of God"[91] attempt to overcome the demise of classical and modern understanding of absolute reason and the rise of hermeneutical reason. In so doing, they are following the Catholic way in order to surmount the challenge of postmodernity.[92] This route has the double advantage of being endorsed, albeit for different reasons, by both the postmodern "academic guild" and the "church board." Besides, since this course of action does not involve the deconstruction of tradition but its affirmation, theologians can, with little effort, use the guidance of classical macro-hermeneutical principles to produce complete "postmodern" systematic theologies. A disadvantage of this path is that it draws its macro-hermeneutical principles from neo-Platonic and Aristotelian ontologies that have been deconstructed by postmodern philosophy.[93] Moreover, by neglecting the temporal approach to ontology assumed by postmodern reason, this approach incurs a methodological contradiction. Besides, it substantially reduces to a bare minimum the contribution and role that Scripture plays in the construction of Christian theology. In sum, it diminishes the role of divine revelation in Scripture and does not account for the paradigm shift in ontological understanding implicit in postmodern thinking.

When conceiving and formulating the contents of the macro-hermeneutical principles of biblical interpretation and doctrinal construction, evangelical thinking

[91]Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 208-209.

[92]John Paul II states: "It is to be hoped that now and in the future there will be those who continue to cultivate this great philosophical and theological tradition for the good of both the Church and humanity" (*Fides et Ratio: Encyclical Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Vatican: Holy See Web Site, 1998).

[93]Not surprisingly, both Oden (*The Living God*, 61-54) and Grenz (*Theology for the Community of God*, 91-92) understand God as a timeless being.

should decide between Parmenides's timelessness and Heidegger's temporality not from human tradition or philosophies, but, following Erickson's suggestion, from the unchanging ground of biblical revelation.[94]

### *God, Time, and Deconstruction*

Yet, how do we answer from Scripture the question of Being that Parmenides, Aristotle, and Heidegger addressed? Scripture does not give thought to this question as these philosophers did. Besides, we do not find in Scripture a technically developed ontology, such as we find in their works. Yet, even though biblical writers did not formulate an ontology following the same procedures and thought patterns we find in Greek philosophy, that does not mean they did not think about these entities. It only means that they reflected about these questions in a different way.

As a matter of fact, Scripture includes specific and detailed interpretations about the beings of God, humans, the world, and the whole. So far, however, most theologians have not appreciated the ontological import of biblical teachings on these issues because they have always interpreted biblical teachings from macro-hermeneutical presuppositions drawn from Greek philosophy. When consciously or unconsciously believers interpret biblical texts from classical macro-hermeneutical principles, the meaning of Scripture becomes adjusted to the timeless horizon of Greek ontology.

The only way to grasp the ontological weight of Scripture consists in canceling out the traditional readings of Scripture (contra Oden, Grenz, and Catholic theology). Technically, this step is analogous to Husserl's methodological ἐποχή (epochē). Methodological ἐποχή is the bracketing out of something.[95] When we place an idea or theory under suspension (ἐποχή), two main consequences follow. First, we suspend judgment on that which we place within brackets. Second, we cannot use the bracketed-out idea or theory in our thinking. Thus we are ready to understand, appreciate, and use biblical teachings to define our macro-hermeneutical presuppositions. Oscar Cullmann says the same thing in simpler terms by advising us to avoid philosophical categories when interpreting NT thought.[96]

[94]Erickson, *Truth or Consequences*, 327.

[95]Edmund Husserl defined and used a methodological procedure he called ἐποχή to gain a perspective that would be "free from all theory" (*Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson, 4th ed. [London: George Allen Unwin, 1931], 111).

[96]Oscar Cullmann states: "The frame within which the writers of the New Testament worked ought to be the same limits which New Testament scholars accept for their work. This means that we must at least attempt to avoid philosophical categories" (*Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, 3d ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964], 11). Cullmann's advice to not use philosophical categories when reading the NT is not a denial of the philosophical import of the biblical texts, but an affirmation that the NT writers did not think from the philosophically

My proposal goes a step further. Whereas Cullmann claims NT scholars should avoid using philosophical categories, I argue that systematic theologians should do the same. It is difficult to see how changing the macro-hermeneutical horizon from which NT writers thought, would help systematicians to understand and construct Christian theology in faithfulness to divine revelation. Changing the biblical macro-hermeneutical horizon in systematic theology from biblical *times* to philosophical *timelessness* required a deconstruction of biblical thinking and a new construction guided by philosophical categories harmonious with the timeless horizon. Classical, modern, and evangelical theologies have been constructed on this hermeneutical tradition that I propose to deconstruct. Some theologians who deconstruct traditionally accepted views claim to do it by reading Scripture from "suppressed and marginalized" theological traditions.[97] In evangelical theology, however, we should deconstruct from Scripture and not by pitting one tradition against the other. Scripture must be the ground and instrument to deconstruct all traditions.

When we read Scripture by purposely canceling the hermeneutical function of the classical interpretation of God as timeless being, we discover what was obvious but dismissed because it did not fit the macro-hermeneutical presuppositions brought by the exegete and theologian to the text. In Scripture, biblical writers understand God and his actions not from the horizon of timelessness, but from the horizon of time. We should realize that when we read Scripture from a temporal rather than a timeless macro-hermeneutical horizon (general and regional ontologies) we are *de facto* deconstructing Christian and evangelical traditions. Since, in so doing, we are also building our ontological, epistemological, and hermeneutical macro-hermeneutical preunderstandings not from reason but from Scripture, we are overcoming postmodernity postmodernly. In other words, the postmodern understanding of reason has no place for the claim that reason can reach absolute truth beyond interpretation or legitimize one interpretation over all others with absolute certainty. It is also true that the reception of biblical revelation takes place through interpretation. Yet the horizon and the principles of interpretation are not forced on us by the traditions to which we belong. On the contrary, we can deconstruct our traditions and define our hermeneutical perspective in continuity or opposition to them.

Contrary to general opinion, the interpretive nature of reason does not imply subjectivity or relativism. Postmodernity has not let go of objectivity; it has only deconstructed the classical-modern interpretation of it generated from the horizon of timelessness. It is also constructing a new understanding of objectivity from the horizon of time. Thus those who interpret reason from the horizon of timelessness incorrectly adjudicate relativism to postmodernity. Moreover, we should recognize that theological fragmentation results from the

generated macro hermeneutics assumed by both Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmaticians.

[97]Smith, 112.

hermeneutical nature of human reason as created by God[98] and not from sin, intellectual defect, or the advent of relativistic postmodern thinking. Realizing that to know is to interpret may help us to understand why there are, and always will be, many ways to understand Christianity.[99]

Thus the classical and modern ways of thinking, which I suggest evangelical theology should deconstruct, will continue to exist. Because all interpretations of Christianity are commensurable,[100] postmodernity sets the stage for the unfolding of a conflict of interpretational dynamics. So, while it is true that in Christian theology many interpretations are possible, it is also true that not every interpretation is true to Scripture's way of thinking. In theology, we should decide theologically, that is, from divine biblical revelation, not from reason.

In deciding the evangelical interpretive horizon, then, we should consider first whether biblical authors assumed an all-inclusive temporal or timeless hermeneutical horizon (the notion of Being). Exegetically and theologically, this task involves many aspects that go far beyond the limits of this article. Here, I only want to show that divine revelation in Scripture works within the horizon of time. As few philosophers have dealt specifically with the issue of Being as an all-inclusive horizon for understanding, few theologians have dealt explicitly with the question of time or timelessness as horizons for understanding.

Working from an exegetical modernist perspective, Cullmann has specifically questioned Scripture regarding its own hermeneutical horizon.[101] He

[98]In his deconstructing of Augustinian tradition, Smith, 146-148, convincingly makes this point.

[99]By applying Kuhn's notion of paradigm shift, Hans Küng has shown the reason for the existence of many schools of Christian theology (*Theology for the Third Millennium*); idem, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Hans Küng and David Tracy, eds. *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

[100]Here I use the term "commensurable" in a different sense than Rorty, 316, who sees that discourses are commensurable only when they work under the same set of rational rules. However, discourses can be commensurable in relation to a common subject matter. Agreeing with Rorty that reason can set for itself different rules to play the rational game, I submit that discourses are commensurable when they share the same subject matter. When we speak about the same thing from different rational perspectives (i.e., macro-hermeneutical paradigms) our discourses are commensurable. Only then can the conflict of interpretations take place and one can ask the question about whether conflicting discourses are mutually exclusive or complementary. If discourses are totally incommensurable, they are by definition unrelated and we cannot compare them either as complementary or contradictory. So, I am not lapsing back to what Rorty calls "epistemology," but rather arguing for the commensurability of hermeneutical discourse where there are always several rationally valid ways to look at the same reality. The question of truth has escaped the power of reason. In theology we do not despair, because we decide the truth of theological assertions not from reason, but from biblical revelation.

[101]Cullmann, 9, specifically refers to the biblical notion of time as a "background" notion, thus agreeing with the hermeneutical function of time I am underlining in this article. I go beyond Cullmann in broadening the hermeneutical role of time to the

has convincingly shown that biblical writers thought and wrote from within the horizon of time.[102] Recently, open-view theologians[103] working from a systematic perspective have initiated a deconstruction of the Augustinian-Calvinistic interpretation of divine providence. They found too many facts in Scripture and experience refusing to fit within the normal Augustinian-Thomistic-Calvinstic science paradigm reigning in evangelical theology at the turn of the millennium. Their own deconstructive efforts led them to reject the classical timeless understanding of God from which the classical Calvinistic paradigm works and to replace it with a temporal understanding of God's being grounded on Scripture and experience.[104]

However, most open-view theologians are unaware of the larger macro-hermeneutical consequences that their switch from a timeless to a temporal understanding of God has beyond the doctrine of divine providence.[105] They are

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macro-hermeneutical level and applying it not only to exegesis, but also systematic theology.

[102]Cullmann, 68, argues that biblical authors understood the death and resurrection of Christ not from the horizon of timelessness, but from the horizon of time. If the understanding of the central truth of Christianity requires the horizon of time, it follows that any construction that looks at the Christ of Christian theology from an implicit timeless horizon must be deconstructed.

[103]John E. Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*; and idem, ed., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

[104]See Sanders, 24-25; Clark H. Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 119-121.

[105]Pinnock recently recognized that he "did not for a moment imagine in 1994 that our book on 'the openness of God' would create such interest and provoke such controversy, particularly in the evangelical community" (*Most Moved Mover*, ix). At the end of *Most Moved Mover*, Pinnock tells us that in advancing the open view of God he thought he was "taking the Bible more seriously," encouraging us "to think more profoundly," and addressing some questions surrounding our cherished relationship with God." Then he asks, "Why the heated and often angry responses?" Only facing what he experienced as disproportionate reactions from his own theological community, Pinnock began to suspect there could be more in what he was doing that he thought. "Obviously, I have touched a raw nerve: the open view of God is different from the tradition of Augustine and Calvin in many respects" (180). At the time, he did not yet seem to have a clear idea about the macro-hermeneutical nature of the "raw nerve" he touched. The same can be said for his critics, especially because they are reacting to what open theism actually says on divine providence and not to the potential hermeneutical-horizon shift hidden behind the open view of God as theological construction. Norman Geisler concludes that the open view of God "leads to a denial of the infallibility of the Bible, the full omniscience of God, the apologetic value of prophecy, and a biblical test for false prophets. It also undermines confidence in the promises of God, his ability to answer prayer, and any ultimate victory over sin. Indeed, it leads logically to universalism and/or annihilationism. And even an

still oblivious to having stumbled on and *de facto* switched the interpretation of the ultimate, all-inclusive, macro-hermeneutical horizon of Christian theology. They do not yet see all the implications of their paradigmatic switch.[106] However, other evangelical theologians, working within the normal scientific Calvinistic paradigm, have clearly perceived some of the hermeneutical consequences implicit in the switch from a timeless to a temporal interpretation of God's being. Briefly put, on the surface the controversy that the open view of God has generated revolves around a small issue within the doctrine of divine providence. Yet, at the deeper hermeneutical level, most open-view theologians have not yet perceived their horizon shift from classical philosophical timelessness to biblical temporality. For this reason, it is still too early to say if they would eventually embrace the new horizon of biblical temporality or reject it.[107]

Ontologically speaking, a phenomenological analysis of Exod 3, the classical text referring to God's being, reveals that God's being is not timeless but temporal.[108] This means that biblical authors assumed a temporal interpretation of God's being compatible with the limited time and space of his creation. Cullmann and open-view theologians are correct—in Scripture, God does not reveal himself from a timeless but from a temporal horizon. Moreover, as Pinnock has correctly recognized, the timeless and temporal horizons are mutually exclusive. We must choose one or the other.[109]

Since the timeless horizon has its origin in philosophical speculation and the temporal-historical horizon has its origin in biblical revelation, it is not difficult to ascertain which horizon evangelical theologians should adopt. Our shift from a timeless to a temporal horizon, then, is not grounded on reason—postmodern or otherwise—but on unchanging biblical revelation. From this macro-hermeneutical horizon, we should attempt to understand not

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alleged revelation of God, confirmed by an act of God, could be false. This undermines any apologetic for Christianity and any credibility in prophetic claims on which the Bible is based" (*Creating God in the Image of Man? The New "Open" View of God—Neotheism's Dangerous Drift* [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997], 145). While correctly criticizing open theism, Bruce A. Ware grasps its consequences within the doctrinal and ecclesiological levels (*God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2000], 16-19). I personally do not agree with the open view of God because I see it as theological construction frozen between two paradigms.

[106]Conceivably, they might not like all the consequences and so opt out of the temporal horizon of biblical thought and settle for the ready-to-use "middle" of the road, dipolar (time-timeless) horizon of neoclassical process philosophy.

[107]See Fernando Canale, "Evangelical Theology and Open Theism: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Macro Hermeneutical Principles of Theology?" *JATS* 12/2 (2001): 16-34.

[108]For a detailed discussion of the ontological import of Exod 3 and its historical understanding of God's being, see Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, chap. 3.

[109]Pinnock states: "These two ideals, the Hellenic and the biblical, cannot really be fused successfully. A decision needs to be made whether to go with one or the other, with the philosophers or with God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ" (*Most Moved Mover*, 7).

only God, but also the entire range of Christian theology.

Next to the understanding of God, the interpretation of human nature plays a most influential macro-hermeneutical role in Christian theology (see above). Classical and modern theologies understand human nature in relation to the timeless soul.[110] When considering Christian doctrines, it is surprising to find out how much they owe to the classical preunderstanding about human nature as timeless soul. Yet, from the perspective of its temporal understanding of God, Scripture sees human beings as also being temporal entities that relate to God historically.[111] Therefore, thinking from within the historical horizon of biblical macro-hermeneutics, we should also rediscover the temporal-historical understanding of human nature present in Scripture and use it as our macro-hermeneutical presupposition.

Deconstruction should start by deconstructing the classical timeless understanding of God, around which the evangelical system of theology revolves. The biblical understanding of God and time is the first step in the long and complex path of deconstructing the many systems Christian theologians have created through the centuries.[112] Here we can only warn the reader not to understand the meaning of God's temporality from classical macro-hermeneutical principles, from philosophical or scientific studies, or to identify it with human temporality.[113] Our understanding of divine temporality can only be secured by glimpsing into the mystery of God's being as revealed in the pages of Scripture.

[110]In classical theology, God's timelessness and the timelessness of the human soul are different. Whereas God has timelessness in its higher and most perfect manifestation, the soul only participates in it at a lower level corresponding to its finitude and relation to the body.

[111]Briefly put, Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul, which is also an ontological idea exported from Greek philosophy into Christian macro hermeneutics and popular belief. As an introduction to this issue, see Oscar Cullmann, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1958); and Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspectives, 1997).

[112]Cullmann states: "How much the thinking of our days roots in Hellenism, and how little in Biblical Christianity, becomes clear to us when we confirm the fact that far and wide the Christian Church and Christian Theology distinguish time and eternity in the Platonic-Greek manner" (*Christ and Time*, 61). Two sentences earlier, Cullmann explained that "for Plato, eternity is not endlessly extended time, but something quite different; it is timelessness."

[113]Philosophical reflection on time is interesting, but certainly not binding in Christian theology. For an introduction to the philosophical discussion on the nature of time, see, e.g., William J. Hill, *Search for the Absent God: Tradition and Modernity in Religious Understanding* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); and William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

Yet, even without a comprehensive study of divine temporality as revealed in Scripture, we can decide to approach the theological task from the temporal horizon assumed by biblical writers. In so doing, we should exercise care not to conceive that God is limited by time as his creatures are. From the testimony of Scripture, it becomes clear that God's time is not to be conceived as being identical to created time (univocal),[114] or as totally different from it (equivocal),[115] but as analogical to our time. This means, for instance, that only God experiences the fullness of time, while we experience it only partially. In comparison with our limited experience of time, God's time appears as "supratemporal," not in the sense that the "supra" should be understood as timeless, but rather, as the fullness of time that only belongs to the mystery of God's being. What is important here is not the development of a detailed ontological model of divine temporality, but that God can experience the temporal succession of future-present-past both in the deepness of his divinity and at the limited level of his creation.[116] In other words, the biblical God experiences in his "eternal" being temporal succession. Without change in his ontological constitution or loss to his perfection, God is able to experience time and do new things not only "for us," but also for himself as, for instance, took place during the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The deconstructive effects of the biblical-temporal horizon applied to the being and actions of God have powerful, all-inclusive deconstructive effects, including not only our understanding of God, but also of his salvific work in history.

[114]This seems to be the general notion behind process philosophy and the open view of God.

[115]Emmanuel Levinas argued this position philosophically (*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 33-40); it seems that Karl Barth also implicitly assumed an equivocal notion of divine temporality, because he simultaneously affirms that God has time and history and understands eternity in the classical timeless way. On divine eternity, Barth states that "the being is eternal in whose duration beginning, succession and end are not three but one, not separate as a first, a second and a third occasion, but one simultaneous occasion as beginning, middle and end. Eternity is the simultaneity of beginning, middle and end, and to that extent it is pure duration. Eternity is God in the sense in which in himself and in all things God is simultaneous, i.e., beginning and middle as well as end, without separation, distance or contradiction. Eternity is not, therefore, time, although time is certainly God's creation or more correctly, a form of His creation. Time is distinguished from eternity by the fact that in it beginning, middle and end are distinct and even opposed as past, present and future" (*Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 13 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936], II/1, 608).

[116]Terence E. Fretheim states: "This common language of planning assumes that temporal sequence is important for God—past, present, and future are meaningful categories. There is temporal succession, a before and after, in the divine thinking. Temporally, God is internally related to the world, that is from within its structure of time, and in such a way that there are now no other options for God" (*The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, ed. Walter Brueggemann, Overtures to Biblical Theology [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 41).

Deconstruction, then, works not as a criticism of the Bible from postmodern assumptions, but as a criticism of classical, modern, and postmodern theological constructions from the Bible. Deconstruction starts by shifting the macro-hermeneutical horizon from philosophical timelessness to Scripture's temporality. From there, theologians should define, in faithfulness to biblical teachings, the necessary macro-, meso-, and micro-hermeneutical principles and, under their guidance, construct and formulate the entire body of Christian theology.

### *Scripture as Ground for Deconstruction*

Obviously, to apply deconstruction to one's own theological system is difficult and painful. However, one should keep in mind that the objective of deconstruction is not to destroy Christian theology, but to open the way for a more faithful understanding of divine biblical revelation. As critical methodology, deconstruction helps us to go back to the foundation upon which tradition claims to build Christian and evangelical theologies. In philosophical studies, Heidegger used deconstruction to get back to the "things themselves" and from a temporal horizon to construct a new philosophical understanding on them.[117] In this way, one realizes that postmodernity does not involve an absolute, unbridled relativism, but a call for a new understanding of objectivity to be worked out from the new macro-hermeneutical horizon of time.[118] The aim and soul of deconstruction, then, resides in the new construction its application facilitates.[119]

A new construction will not be possible if, after deconstructing the Grand Tradition, we do not find the "things themselves." Yet, what are the "things themselves" in theology? James Smith seems to suggest that in theology the "things themselves" are God, and the Spirit understood as "Word without words."[120] This view reveals the Pentecostal tradition to which Smith belongs. According to this tradition, we experience God's presence, the "thing itself," directly in our inner being. This idea stands very close to the evangelical experience of the "gospel" or justification by faith as understood by Luther.[121]

Identifying the "things themselves" with God's presence as "Word without

[117]Heidegger, *Being and Time*, II, §7, 49-50.

[118]With the help of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Dooyeweerd, Smith, 169-175, convincingly argues this point.

[119]This corresponds to the "messianic" aspect in Derrida's deconstruction.

[120]Smith, 180.

[121]Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament*, Luther's Works, vol. 35, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999], 119-123. E. Theodore Bachmann states: "According to Luther's understanding, the Word of God is not simply to be equated with the written text of the Scriptures, for it goes much deeper than historical description or moral precept. Rather, it is a uniquely life-imparting power, a message communicated by men in whom the Scriptures had become alive" ("Introduction," in *Word and Sacrament*, LW, 35:1-2).

words" allows Smith to argue his point, namely, to make room for diversity of interpretation in the theological community.[122] However, in the field of theological knowledge only Scripture as divine revelation can provide the "things themselves." Gadamer helps us to see this when he applies the Heideggerian notion of "things themselves" also to texts.[123] Even Smith seems to assume that the only cognitive public source of data we have from which to build Christian theology is biblical revelation.[124] After all, scriptural teachings made Luther's deconstruction possible. Without Scripture, a theological deconstruction of the hermeneutical principles of theology would be impossible.

### *Deconstructing Christian Hermeneutics*

While theoretically affirming the *sola Scriptura* principle, evangelical theology has been constructed from hermeneutical principles of philosophical origin. Deconstruction, therefore, must start by analyzing the hermeneutical principles operative in theological and creedal traditions.[125] At this level, the aim of deconstruction is to identify macro-hermeneutical principles based on classical ontology and to replace them with biblical teachings on the beings of God, humans, and the world. This will give concrete content to the macro-hermeneutical shift from timelessness to temporality and put an end to almost two millennia of hermeneutical bondage to philosophy.[126]

[122]Smith, 9, 183-184.

[123]Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 267.

[124]Smith, 180.

[125]McGrath, 149, encourages theologians to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to tradition. We should "be on our guard and understand why we believe certain things rather than just accepting them passively from those we recognize as masters and teachers. Tradition is something that is to be actively and selectively appropriated, not passively and unthinkingly received." McGrath, 153, argues that Calvin also shared a critical approach to tradition. Deconstruction as I am presenting it here is the methodological formalization of the hermeneutics of suspicion that McGrath and Calvin speak about; yet, I doubt they would be willing to apply it at the hermeneutical level and to the extent I am suggesting in this article.

[126]Though Kevin J. Vanhoozer, in his recent "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], 61-106), does not deal with the issue of hermeneutics or deconstruction as I do here. Instead, he calls for the leading role of Scripture in determining the macro-hermeneutical principles of theology. He writes: "I have come to believe that, with regard to method, we have to construe or configure *three* factors together: God, Scripture, *and* the nature of theology. We have to enter into a biblical-theological variant of the hermeneutic circle. Decisions taken here affect what we might call, after the philosophers, 'first theology'—the principles that, methodologically speaking, come first" (74). Of course, as I have argued above, there are more principles involved in what Vanhoozer correctly calls "first theology" and I call "macro-hermeneutical principles." The important point is that, as an evangelical theologian, he recognizes the grounding role of Scripture in hermeneutics.

To say that Scripture provides the "things themselves" means that they will guide us in the deconstructive process of received theological traditions, as well as in the new deconstruction-construction they make possible. When we apply the deconstruction-construction method to the macro-hermeneutical principles of theology, we have taken the first methodological step in the deconstructive path. We have thereby replaced the onto-theo-logical order of classical theology with a new theo-onto-logical order that is faithful to Scripture.[127] This means that we will no longer define our macro-hermeneutical principles philosophically. On the new order, we will define them theologically by adopting those principles operative in biblical thinking. Methodologically, then, deconstruction starts by securing the hermeneutical independence of Christian theology from philosophy.

### *Deconstructing the Wesleyan Quadrilateral*

Implicit in the deconstruction of the hermeneutical principles of evangelical theology is the deconstruction of its sources. For convenience, I am dealing with the question of sources under the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" designation. In this section, the historical origin of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" label within the Methodist tradition is not important. Here we are interested in the question of sources this label evokes. Broadly speaking, Christian theologians use all sources useful to their purposes. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral designation helps us to classify the sources into four general types, namely, Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Different traditions use these sources with different emphases. Evangelical theology is perhaps the tradition that gives greater prominence to Scripture. However, claiming prominence for Scripture within the plurality of sources implicit in the Wesleyan Quadrilaterial does not call for the *sola Scriptura*, but for the *prima Scriptura*, principle.[128] *Prima Scriptura* gives theoretical prominence

[127]For a more detailed explanation of this foundational methodological shift, see Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, 285-297.

[128]This is made clear by Woodrow W. Whidden, who deals with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral within the limited context of the Methodist and American Fundamentalism. He incorrectly considers the *sola Scriptura* principle as the cause for the "bewildering array of doctrinal options that have arisen among the groups that strenuously profess fidelity to the Bible as their sole authority" ("*Sola Scriptura*, Inerrantist Fundamentalism and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is 'No Creed but the Bible' a Workable Solution?" *AUSS* 35 [1997]: 214). Among the various possible causes for theological diversity not all are theological. Cultural, temperamental, psychological, and ecclesiological reasons are always involved in theological disagreements. Theologically speaking, however, Whidden, 219, correctly recognizes that American fundamentalism did not follow through with its theoretical claim of abiding by the *sola Scriptura* principle. If this is so, then, variety in American fundamentalism might be traced back to its macro-hermeneutical principles unconsciously derived, via tradition, from Greek philosophy. Whidden seems to forget that, as theological source, "reason" involves more than a rationalistic apologetical procedure to fight Enlightenment rationalism on its own turf. Reason also includes ontological interpretations, which, sooner or later, become the real hermeneutical guides, which Whidden certainly would not consciously allow in his theology. However, by arguing in favor of the Wesleyan

to Scripture among other recognized sources theologians may use to communicate the "message of salvation." By using the *prima Scriptura* formula, theologians recognize the normative role of Scripture, but simultaneously accept and justify the existence and contribution of other sources of theology. The problem is that before the message can be "communicated," it must be constructed. The fact that what has come to be called "the gospel" (the message of salvation) is also a theological construction is often neglected by evangelical theologians. Thus many of them speak about the "message" or the "gospel" as if existing in a privileged, experiential level beyond hermeneutics and theological construction. As a result, the way in which the plurality of sources has shaped the traditional understanding of the "message of salvation" remains hidden and removed from theological analysis.

The quadrilateral approach to theological sources justifies the use of sources other than Scripture for theological purposes. In so doing, it facilitates the classical and modern conviction that we may draw the macro-hermeneutical principles for doing theology from philosophy and science. By affirming the *sola Scriptura* principle, the deconstruction program I am proposing requires the deconstruction of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Sources approach. This is necessary to ground the macro hermeneutics of evangelical theology in Scripture and not in tradition or philosophy. This leads away from Oden's and Grenz's proposals to overcome the postmodern challenge by drawing our hermeneutics from past or present traditions. It also leads away from classical and modern theological approaches, which freely derived their hermeneutical guidance from philosophy and science.

To affirm that Scripture is God's specific revelation and simultaneously insist that the hermeneutical principles to understand it should be drawn from hypothetical philosophical and scientific interpretations of reality is incoherent. Besides, it does violence to the basic scientific principle in which we should let things speak for themselves. If God has revealed himself in Scripture, why should we draw our macro-hermeneutical principles from philosophy or science? That Christian theology has been constructed on this basis does not make it mandatory for us to continue doing it in the same way. Instead, it shows us the need for deconstructing traditional theological systems in order to facilitate the construction of evangelical theology from biblical macro-hermeneutical principles. To define the macro-hermeneutical principles of evangelical theology from Scripture is more coherent and convincing than to persist in deriving them from always-changing philosophical and scientific opinions. Of course, the deconstruction of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral will also

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Quadrilateral and the *prima Scriptura* principle, he is arguing in favor of the multiple-source approach Protestant theology inherited from Roman Catholic theology. Facing the added challenge of postmodernity, which Whidden does not consider in his article, the way out of negative diversity in Christian theology is not the affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle, but its use as ground and instrument to deconstruct-construct evangelical theology. Kevin Vanhoozer correctly underlines the existence of positive theological diversity (*The Voice and the Actor*, 78-79). Because we receive both intermingled as theological traditions, deconstruction becomes a necessary methodological step in Christian theology.

involve the deconstruction-construction of the revelation-inspiration of Scripture.[129] I have dealt with this foundational issue in another publication.[130]

### *Deconstruction and Biblical Theology*

Under the hermeneutical guidance of Greek philosophy, Christian theology has been constructed mainly as systematic theology. Biblical theology is a relatively recent theological discipline. Though its antecedents can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation, it only became an independent theological discipline around the middle of the eighteenth century.[131] In its opposition to dogmatic theology,[132] the deconstructive bent of biblical theology became most apparent since its inception. However, due to its dependence on classical and modern macro-hemeneutical principles, some proposals made by biblical theology have been, unfortunately, negative.

The deconstructive-constructive program that I am suggesting in this article is closely related to biblical theology and relates to it in two main ways. First, it calls for the deconstruction of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. We should apply deconstruction to the hermeneutical and methodological foundations from which biblical theologians have retrieved the meaning of the biblical text. The methodology broadly used during the twentieth century is known as the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation.[133]

[129]Whidden, 219-221, correctly reacts against the evangelical doctrine of verbal inspiration, inerrancy, and the wooden rationalistic hermeneutics that flows from it. However, the solution is not to maintain, via tradition (one source in the quadrilateral), the classical doctrine of verbal inspiration and inerrancy in hopes of "balancing" it with other sources in the quadrilateral. Rather, by affirming the *sola Scriptura* principle, traditional views on revelation-inspiration should be deconstructed and a new model faithful to Scripture's macro-hermeneutical principles constructed.

[130]Canale, *Back to Revelation-Inspiration.*

[131]G. Ebeling traces back the origin of biblical theology to the publication of *Gedanken von der Beschaffenheit und dem Vorzug der biblisch-dogmatischen Theologie vor der alten und neuen scholastischen* (1758), by Anton Friedrich Büsching (*Word and Faith*, trans. James W. Leitch [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963], 87). Gerhard Hasel gives a slightly earlier date for the independence of biblical theology from dogmatics: "As early as 1745 'Biblical theology' is clearly separated from dogmatic (systematic) theology and the former is conceived of as being the foundation of the latter" (*Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 18).

[132]According to Ebeling, 87, biblical theology became "a rival of the prevailing dogmatics [scholastic theology]." With Johann Philipp Gabler's 1787 presentation, biblical theology "set itself up as a completely independent study, namely, as a critical historical discipline alongside dogmatics" (ibid., 88). See also Anthony C. Thiselton, "Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 520.

[133]From a methodological viewpoint, the best introduction to the historical-critical method that I know is by Steven McKenzie and Stephen Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville: Westminster John

Though this method has already been criticized by biblical theologians, the deconstruction and replacement of its classical and modern macro-hermeneutical principles has not yet been accomplished.[134] In other words, the historical-critical method cannot be assumed or utilized in the task of deconstructing evangelical theology because it works from classical and modern macro-hermeneutical principles, which must be deconstructed from Scripture. As a result, the application of the historical-critical method produces the deconstruction and ensuing destruction of biblical thought. Second, once the historical-critical method has been deconstructed and replaced by a methodology based on biblical macro-hermeneutical principles, biblical theology becomes an indispensable ally in the deconstruction-construction of the various traditional theological systems and practices currently operative in Christianity.

### *Conclusion*

I hope the brief outline presented in this article suffices to show the need and possibility of a deconstruction of evangelical theology. The need arises from the method and the hermeneutical presuppositions involved in its construction. That is to say, the need for a deconstructive step in theological method stems from the fact that evangelical theology has been constructed by using macro-hermeneutical presuppositions inherited from tradition and interpreted from the timeless horizon dictated by the Greek understanding of Being (Parmenides-Plato-Aristotle). This interpretation stands in direct opposition to the temporal horizon of biblical thought. The possibility of theological deconstruction springs from the "things themselves" provided to theologians by biblical revelation. Thus, in evangelical theology, deconstruction becomes the necessary instrument to facilitate the Reformation's adage, *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est*" (a reformed church is to be ever reforming). In our case, "*theologia reformata semper reformanda est.*"[135]

Understanding biblical thinking from the horizon of time becomes the source of all deconstruction and the basis of all new construction under the methodological guidance of the *sola*, *tota*, and *prima Scriptura* principles.

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Knox, 1999). The historical-critical method has been criticized, among others, in the following works: Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical Critical Method*, trans. Edwin W. Leverenze and Rudolph F. Norden (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977). Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990); and idem, *Biblical Criticism on Trial: How Scientific is "Scientific Theology,"* trans. Robert Yarbrough (Kregel, 1998).

[134]To see that every method necessarily involves definitions and application of macro-hermeneutical principles, see Canale, "Interdisciplinary Method in Christian Theology?"

[135]George Vandervelde states: "Without a clear affirmation of the Scripture as supreme criterion, there is no defense against tradition becoming more than interpretive, more than receptive. Without the over-against of the Scriptures the church has no adequate antidote to the illusion that it is exempt from the call of *semper reformand*" ("Scripture and Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19/2 [1995]: 144-156).

Deconstruction starts from the macro- meso-, and micro-hermeneutical principles and extends to revelation-inspiration, methodological issues, and the entire scope of the theology and practices of the church.

When deconstruction is not applied *to* Scripture, but *from* Scripture to traditionally received and accepted beliefs and practices, deconstruction becomes not a postmodern enemy, but an ally. In so doing, we become aware that we should no longer ground our hermeneutical principles from tradition, philosophy, or science. Instead, we become involved in the task of defining them from Scripture. Though critical of tradition, deconstruction does not imply its wholesale destruction. On the contrary, it guides us in a critical retrieval of those aspects that refuse to conform to the timeless horizon of Greek ontology. In other words, it helps to recover what reflects theological understanding constructed from the temporal-historical horizon of biblical macro hermeneutics.

The task ahead is monumental. Centuries of theological construction must be carefully understood and evaluated from the biblical-temporal horizon within which God's being and actions were understood and described by OT and NT writers. No single person can accomplish such a task. All theologians and disciplines should join in by incorporating deconstruction as a necessary step in the task of doing theology, as a step in the study of theological prolegomena or meta-theological issues.

Deconstruction is a painful task because, through critical analysis faithful to Scripture, it modifies and even rejects long-held and cherished ideas. Yet obedience to Christ, the great theological deconstructionst, and the deconstructionist examples of Luther and Calvin should encourage us to press on to complete the unfinished task with renewed determination. In so doing, we will be following Christ's command to build our life on the rock of his words we receive in Scripture (OT and NT) (Matt 7:24). Simultaneously, we will be overcoming the challenge of postmodernity not only in postmodern terms, but also in faithfulness to the evangelical commitment to Scripture's revelation.