

**The Gospel of *Caritas*  
The Church as an Open Society—Toward a More Inclusive Witness\***

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Today the church is at the crossroad of its life and witness. Its identity and function in the society are being challenged anew by the changing world it continually addresses. Philip Davis presents to us another challenge of the context to the church. In his essay, “The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative,” Davis elucidates for us the challenge of postmodernism in the language of Jean-François Lyotard and the evangelical response of Lieven Boeve with his proposal of a Christian open narrative.

If the church is not able to express itself today in the language that meets the “postmodern challenge,” Lyotard and other proponents of postmodernism would probably call on the church to cease and deace. Postmodernists claim that Christianity with its claim for meta-narrative has lost its credibility and, therefore, its cultural relevancy, notwithstanding its ecclesiastical authority. Consequently, it had to be abandoned if not totally abolished. Christianity, however, is not new to challenges—be they of faith, praxis, or witness. It has historically expressed and re-expressed itself in the language of various cultures and contexts at different times. It has done contextualization and re-contextualization for effective witness and mission. In the recent book I have written entitled, *We Are Catholic: Catholic, Catholicity, and Catholicization*,<sup>1</sup> I argue for the necessity of Christian apologetics. And one of the best approaches to Christian apologetics is dialogue, which Jerry H. Gill proposes in his book, *Faith in Dialogue: A Christian Apologetic*. He says,

Against the backdrop of these standard postures toward apolo-

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\* *Editor’s Note:* This article is a response to Phillip E. Davis, “The Postmodern Condition and the Christian Open Narrative,” *Mediator* 12, no. 1 (2017): 1–44, above.

<sup>1</sup> Jason V. Hallig, *We Are Catholic: Catholic, Catholicity, and Catholicization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

getics, I should like to invite the reader to take up a more dialogical posture when reasoning about Christian faith, whether approaching it as a believer or as an unbeliever. It is my conviction that the only apologetic appropriate both to the nature of Christian belief and to the pluralistic character of our times is one which is open enough to acknowledge the limitations of religious knowledge and faith as well as to affirm their reasonableness. We must remember that even believers “see through a glass, darkly,” and that there is no inherent contradiction between confidence and humility.<sup>2</sup>

Davis’ support of Boeve’s deep engagement with Lyotard’s thought challenges us to further engage in an open dialogue with postmodern contexts on two fronts—on the contextual-theological and the philosophical-theological. Davis believes that Boeve’s work can be fruitful for Christian theology. And for this, we need to join him in calling the church to a more inclusive approach to dialogue within the pluralistic context and character of our times, recognizing the fact that Christian theology has its own limitations which can be enriched by a responsible and respectful discussion with others who differ from who we are and what we believe.

#### The Gospel of the Church: Lyotard’s Criticism and Condemnation of Christianity

Lyotard points us all to the shift of knowledge in the post-industrial era, where knowledge is legitimized in and through the criterion of performativity. Knowledge based on metaphysical or narrational truth, such as the Christian faith, is held suspect. The new paradigm of knowledge as here proposed by Lyotard to be the postmodern condition posits another language game geared toward power augmentation rather than truth argumentation. The way to this knowledge, however, is in and through evolutionary knowledge that dynamically redefines the rules and functions of scientific knowledge in relation to reality, which under the postmodern principle of knowledge is no longer constant and universal but contingent and particular.

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry H. Gill, *Faith in Dialogue: A Christian Apologetic* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 12.

The shift of knowledge and the principles governing evolutionary knowledge have indeed tremendous implications for the church and its faith claims that are based on the meta-narrative of the gospel that serves as its overarching authority. Lyotard puts forward an accusation against institutions such as Christianity. He believes that by the use of meta-narrative as the authority for the truth, Christianity has made victims instead of victors. This is so because the very narrative that was intended to save has instead enslaved “believers,” leading toward an oppressive society under its totalitarian rule. Lyotard points to examples in the history of the church, like that of Joan of Arc and those involved in the Reformation.

For Lyotard, the Christian narrative is the grand narrative *par excellence*. Christianity with its principle of universality has created and influenced institutions that propagated either freedom, as in the case of democracy, or equality, as in the case of communism. Each has its “universal” story for humanity. Sadly, the end result is the reverse of whatever good was promised. Davis notes,

Lyotard hates such universal narratives. For grand narratives make victims, and the past century was awash in blood shed for such stories. Countless millions of people suffered under mythical, emancipator, and economic grand narratives. The ideas governing these narratives could not establish their promised utopias. Indeed, Lyotard sees these grand narratives as evil. For people who resisted their programs were silenced, starved, gassed, and shot.<sup>3</sup>

Lyotard’s accusation and condemnation of the Christian narrative, however, are based on his empirical and political observations of Christianity. His evaluation of Christianity is more socio-political and socio-economic than Biblical or theological, using philosophical epistemology under the influence of postindustrial epistemology or “postmodernism.” Under such lenses, Christianity stands guilty based on its history. This is so because Lyotard evaluated Christianity through its own theological reconstructions (via ecclesiastical hermeneutics and church dogmatics, hence, the gospel of the church), which were used as bases for what was often ap-

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 24.

plied in the areas of politics and economics. Under ecclesiastical authority (by the Roman Catholic), dogmatic theologies (by the Protestants), and even heretical claims of pseudo-Christian religious institutions, Christianity had developed meta-narratives that were indeed oppressive. And therefore, we cannot blame Lyotard for his accusation and condemnation of Christianity. However, had he evaluated Christianity from a more Biblical and theological perspective, he would have ended his conclusion differently and his challenge for Christianity today would have been a more theological-philosophical one, which in turn would have given him a more valid evaluation of Christianity.

Apparently, the nature of Christian theology (or theologies) is neither final nor static, but one that is open and dialogical. The history of the church shows how the theologies of the “church” have grown from being oppressive and exclusive to becoming more redemptive and inclusive; from political and economic to more spiritual and kingdom-oriented—a more inclusive witness of the gospel of Christ in and for the world.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, when the gospel of the church is closer to the gospel of Christ, Christianity has a more open narrative, as Boeve suggests. And to this we now turn.

#### The Gospel of Christ: Boeve’s Challenge to the Church

A proper response to the challenge of Lyotard is to take a closer look at the gospel of Christ than at the gospel of the church. Sadly, the gospel of the church at times differs from the gospel of Christ, and what critics including Lyotard often see and attack is the gospel version/s of the church. Boeve is right that the gospel of Christ always needs a re-expression toward a more inclusive and effective witness and mission. As Davis puts it, “Older ideas, metaphors, or practices no longer convey spiritual truths as they once did.”<sup>5</sup> Reflection and rethinking must always be on-going works of theology both for the church and the world. Referencing Boeve, Davis rightly notes that “with the shift from the modern to the postmodern,

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<sup>4</sup> For a more inclusive socio-political kingdom, see N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 27.

theology must recontextualize itself again.”<sup>6</sup>

The language of postmodernism makes traditional theology weak, if not totally useless. The rules of the game of language and culture have changed from hegemony to heterogeneity, from universal to particular, and from consensus to plurality. To insist on the old language of Christian theology is to close an opportunity to reach out to the present world. Davis reports Boeve’s recognition of how radical theologians have taken a new approach by adapting a “‘neo-Augustinian conceptual framework,’ to develop a new (postmodern) epistemology, where the particular ‘participates in its infinite eternal source,’ avoiding, thereby, the finite’s ultimate dissolution in either a modern epistemology or postmodern nihilism.”<sup>7</sup> On the philosophical-theological level, Boeve sees a window of opportunity to engage in a responsible and respectful dialogue with postmodern critical consciousness. As Davis points out, Boeve celebrates the fact that “Lyotard gives us access to a current critical consciousness, where the particular is privilege over the universal, and one becomes conscious of irreducible particularity and plurality.”<sup>8</sup>

To engage in dialogue with postmodernism, Boeve suggests that the Christian narrative must be open to otherness and difference. An open narrative has three characteristics: an open sensitivity to otherness, offers a witness to otherness, and a critical praxis.<sup>9</sup> Openness is the key to dialogue and discussion. The church gains the right of engagement by choosing to recognize that in the postmodern context, Christian theology is not everybody’s story. Our narrative is only a narrative within narratives. The church, therefore offers a truth, not the Truth, to the other. The Truth is born out of the dynamic world of narratives; the other seizes the Truth within his/her narrative in and through mutual openness. Davis notes that “the theologian gives up on mastering God or neighbor through his own narrative.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the Christian open narrative invites the other

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<sup>6</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 27.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 30.

<sup>8</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 30.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 38–9.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 39.

in and through radical openness. Davis rightly adds, “Rather, in postmodern thought, s/he finds ‘a manner of expressing contextually and understandably the evangelical option for the poor, the refugee, [and] the “sinner.””<sup>11</sup>

The open narrative is the model that Christ had taken in and through his incarnational life and ministry. In my article, “The Eating ‘Motif’ in the Gospel of Luke,”<sup>12</sup> I pointed out how Jesus’ manner of eating with sinners and tax collectors communicated his life and mission as the Messiah in and through a shared context, which Boeve calls “interruption”:

It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence. Interruptions cause the narrative to collide with its own borders. They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening toward the other within the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

People responded in openness to Jesus’ openness for them. When people apprehended the Truth of Jesus, they confessed their faith in him. In openness for otherness and difference, Christ offered his witness.

#### The Gospel of *Caritas*: A Proposal toward a More Inclusive Witness

As the community of disciples, the church is given the task of making disciples.<sup>14</sup> How does the incredulity towards meta-narratives affect not only our identity but also our function as a community of disciples? While we have no problem considering our story as one among many in a very pluralistic world, we hold on to the fact that our story is something that we have to tell to the nations. Boeve’s proposal of an open narrative is true to the nature of the Biblical story. In the context of the church, my pro-

<sup>11</sup> Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 39.

<sup>12</sup> Jason V. Hallig, “The ‘Eating’ Motif in the Gospel of Luke,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1:79 (2016).

<sup>13</sup> Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval*, trans., Brian Doyle (New York; London: Continuum, 2007), 42; quoted in Davis, “Postmodern Condition,” 40.

<sup>14</sup> See Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Double Day, 1987).

posal is that we put emphasis on the gospel of *caritas* toward a more inclusive witness, on three grounds.

First, the gospel of *caritas* is an open narrative. It was Augustine who used and developed *caritas* in the context of relationships marked either by difference or misunderstanding.<sup>15</sup> Aware of the difference that exists in human relationships, Augustine believed that it is only in God's love that we can truly love one another. *Caritas* conveys the idea not only of self-giving, but also of other-desiring. In *caritas*, the other is desired (in the spirit of a Greek word *eros*—this of course is the good application of *eros*; cf. *cupiditas*);<sup>16</sup> but the desire is neither in the context nor for the purpose of self-satisfaction or self-gratification (*concupiscentia*), but more on the value of the other as created in the image of God. *Caritas* is a gift of God to men and women that enables them to truly love one another as God loves them. God's love toward men and women is not only self-giving, but also other-desiring. He desires men and women not because of the inherent value we have as sinners or sinful, but because of the reality that men and women were created in his image. It is the image of God that creates the desire in God to love us just as we are. Lyotard's misconception of love as manipulative (it being a meta-narrative force to Lyotard) is a misapprehension of love as *caritas*. In fact, *caritas* in its openness, was made particular in Christ, in and through whom God calls men and women in openness to love him in and with the same openness. There is no love without openness. It is the openness of love that makes the story of difference toward fellowship and wholeness. The church is always an open society, it being a society of *caritas*.

Second, the gospel of *caritas* is more personal than philosophical or propositional. Lyotard's overemphasis on "difference" made men and women as impersonal beings who operated or lived in and through techniques and technologies. We cannot simply define persons in the language of progress and prospects. Life is not only defined by our love of knowledge (reason/philosophy) but more so by our knowledge of love

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<sup>15</sup> As quoted by T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People: The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 57–62.

<sup>16</sup> Noble, *Holy Trinity*, 62.

(revelation/theology). The Christian witness puts more premium on the personhood of men and women than on their productivity or performativity. Hence, rather than spending our time with nightly news to engage in intellectual witnessing, we should pursue personal and authentic relationships with those who are different from us. The church must strengthen relationships in the context of personhood. Love dissolves differences and divisions; it creates union of persons (not a collection of individuals as postmodernists suggest) in and through openness. Hence, the church is an open society.

Third, gospel of *caritas* is dynamic and progressive. Creativity and productivity are not foreign to love and the church. In fact, the world is as it is today because of the contributions of Christianity, contrary to Lyotard's accusation that Christianity with its meta-narrative simply made victims. The communal aspect of love, in fact, cultivates growth and progress. Love lets us live for the other. This is what H. Ray Dunning calls authentic freedom—that openness for the other.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

In and through his accusation and condemnation of Christianity, Lyotard challenged the church to rethink its narrative, reflect on its ways, and refocus its message. Both Boeve and Davis believe that the church cannot just ignore postmodernism as elucidated by Lyotard. I agree that the challenge of context is always valid and legitimate. Boeve and Davis are right that we need to do some *recontextualization* of the gospel for a condition that no longer values meta-narratives but micro-narratives. To do so, we must give attention to the gap between the gospel of the church and the gospel of Christ. My proposal is that *recontextualization* must give importance to the gospel of *caritas*. It is only in and through the gospel of *caritas* that an open narrative becomes incarnational, practical, and personal, and so gives room for otherness and difference.

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<sup>17</sup> H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and holiness; A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1988), 280-283.