III. NARRATIVE AND RELIGION

1. Metanarratives

In the late 1970s the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard issued a booklet entitled *The Postmodern Condition.*[26] Herein he described postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives.' That is a helpful description of the postmodern situation, one that I will make use of in this lecture. I will have to begin by explaining what Lyotard means by the term metanarrative.

Examples of metanarrives: Christian and pagan

In previous lectures I have been calling postmodernism a world-view. Postmodernists themselves do not agree with that description, for they say that our age is not only postmodern but also post-world-view. They are right — at least up to a point — in saying that. One of the characteristics of a world-view is that it gives cohesion to a society, and postmodernism does nothing of the kind. It fractures and divides it. Nevertheless, when speaking of postmodernism I will continue to call it a world-view, for that term also refers to a society's widely-shared belief systems, to the prevailing climate of opinion or spirit of the age, and these descriptions do apply to postmodernism.

Instead of calling such belief systems world-views I could also call them 'metanarratives' or 'grand stories.' Those are the terms Lyotard and other postmodernists use. They do this because world-views tend to be structured in the form of stories. This applies not only to the Christian world-view, which is based on the biblical narrative, but to many non-christian ones as well. World-views resemble stories in that they speak of a beginning and an end of history and deal with heroes and common people, with victories and defeats, with conflicts and the resolution of conflicts, in the same way as common stories do. It is in such narrative form that they attempt to answer the questions mankind has about God and man and the world, about what we should believe, how we should live, and what knowledge we need.

Postmodernism distinguishes between local stories and grand stories or metanarratives. The former are held by only part of a community, so that several of them can exist together. They fit a pluralistic society. The latter refer to larger and more comprehensive world-views, those

that rule an entire community or even several communities. As I suggested, the Christian world-view can be seen as such a metanarrative. So can the modern world-view with its faith in humanism, science, and progress. These various metanarratives served, postmodernists say, to *legitimate*, that is, to justify, the knowledge and belief systems of their societies. People acted in a certain way, and taught and believed certain things, because it was in accordance with their metanarrative.

We should distinguish here, incidentally, between Christianity as a metanarrative on the one hand, and narrative theology and narrative preaching on the other, for they are not quite the same thing. I will deal with the second topic later. When speaking about Christianity as a metanarrative I simply refer to the Christian world-view. At one time in our past all the people of the western world lived under that world-view. Believers still do.

The Christian one is not the only religious metanarrative history has known. Pagan cultures also have had their religious 'stories,' and these too served as guides for their societies. About half a century ago the Dutch theologian Hendrik Berkhof wrote an interesting book on the nature of these pagan structures. In English translation it is entitled *Christ and the Powers* (original Dutch title: *Christus en de machten)*.[27] In this work Berkhof pays attention to the powers, dominions, authorities, principalities, and so on, to which the Apostle Paul refers in several of his letters, and suggests that these served functions similar to those of the metanarratives we have been discussing.[28] They provided the people with laws, customs, traditions, political and social structures, moral codes, and various other rules. So they gave stability and coherence to their societies, which otherwise would have succumbed to the powers of chaos and disintegration.

Although pagan, these powers must therefore be seen, Berkhof says, as gifts of God's providence, and as serving under the cosmic dominion of Christ. They retained their autonomy until the gospel came, when they had to yield their absolute power to Christ. We read in Colossians 2.15 that Christ, "having disarmed the powers and authorities, . . . made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." Peoples who had for millennia been imprisoned in pagan belief systems with their darkness and legalisms and sometimes cruel cults, were placed into the freedom of the children of God. This happened first in the Mediterranean world and Europe and then, as a result of European mis-

sionary activity, also in non-western countries. To return to our postmodern terminology, in large areas of the world the Christian metanarrative replaced millennia-old pagan ones.

The rejection of metanarratives

When Lyotard and his followers say that our age is an age of 'incredulity toward metanarratives,' they mean that the age of overarching world-views is past; that both the Christian metanarrative and the remaining non-Christian ones are losing their power. All these metanarratives were defeated, they say, by western science. Science and technology were responsible first of all for the secularization of the Christian West, but when the scientific tradition spread beyond Europe, they had a similar effect in the rest of the world, also in that part that had not yet received the gospel.

In short, the triumph of science led to the secularization of both Christian and non-Christian cultures. It destroyed the religious traditions of Christian and pagan nations alike. Science had this secularizing effect because it gave mankind a dominion over nature that no metanarrative had ever provided, and it did so without recourse to any supernatural power. It showed mankind that a heavenly city could be built by human strength alone; that neither God nor tradition were necessary.

But if science destroyed the old religious narratives, it did so only by substituting a new and secular one. For science, it turned out, also needed to legitimate itself by means of a story. In fact, according to Lyotard, it substituted two such stories. One appealed especially to Germans, although it spread to many other countries as well, including the United States. It was influenced by the philosophy of the Idealist philosopher Hegel, and portrayed knowledge as the means of forming the human mind and of advancing the civilization of the spirit.

The other metanarrative developed in France and it, too, was exported to large parts of the world. This one saw knowledge as the means of freeing humanity from oppression, as the force that would help bring about liberty, equality, and brotherhood, and as the guarantor of ever-increasing progress. It developed during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. It was tested in the French revolution and in numerous lesser uprisings, and it also played a role in the rise and triumph of communism.

These scientific metanarratives were the ones dominating the

modern era. And like practically all things modern, they are rejected by postmodernism, which distrusts them almost as much as it distrusts the old religious world-views. There are at least three specific reasons for the postmodernist unbelief in the scientific grand stories with their gospel of progress. In the first place, people living at the end of the twentieth century (a pre-eminently scientific one) have experienced too many dictatorships, totalitarianisms, wars, and other disasters to believe that scientific knowledge makes man free and morally good. The civilization of the spirit has not arrived, either in Germany or anywhere else, and neither have the promises of the French Enlightenment been realized. Both the French revolutionaries and the Russian Marxists failed to bring about freedom and brotherhood. The other promise, that of equality, has also been left unfulfilled. The dividing line between rich and poor has not been erased, and that between rich nations and poor nations has widened, and continues to do so. The idea of progress through science, in short, is being recognized by postmodernism as no more than a modern myth. It has outlived its usefulness, if ever it had any.

That is one reason for its rejection. A second one is that the twentieth century has become aware of the negative potential of science and technology themselves. This is a point to which we gave attention earlier. We noticed that whereas previously it was believed that scientific knowledge was altogether for the good, the postmodern era has become aware of the threats it poses to society. These threats run all the way from nuclear weaponry to the exhaustion of natural resources, from the abuse of power in genetic and social engineering to the destruction of the physical environment.

A third reason for the rejection of the scientific metanarrative is that postmodernism no longer believes that science can lead to truth. It has lost this belief because postmodern philosophers of science (such as Michael Polanyi, Thomas Kuhn, and various others) have shown the subjective element in science, and also because developments in science itself (and in mathematics as well)[29] have undermined the faith in man's ability to achieve full and final knowledge of nature. Science, for postmodernism, is no more the royal road to truth than it is the guarantor of liberty, equality, brotherhood, and progress. It is simply, like everything else in life, a means of achieving power. For many postmodernist thinkers its function is limited to being 'the handmaiden of technology.'[30] This demotion does not mean that postmodernism believes science will

end. Some make that prediction, but others are convinced that discoveries will continue and even accelerate.

In any event, postmodernists say that we are past the age of grand stories, religious and non-religious ones alike. And they add that this is all for the good. We will have to live henceforth not with master narratives, but with local narratives only. Such restricted narratives are safe enough. Grand narratives, however, are dangerous, because they are universal and therefore 'totalizing,' which means that all people in a certain society are supposed to believe in them, or at least to act in accordance with them. Postmodernists say that this leads to the marginalizing and terrorizing of people who don't belong to the dominant group, and that therefore pluralism is the way to go. Each society should have a lot of different stories — let us say a Muslim, a Buddhist, a secular and a New Age one, a few aboriginal ones, and perhaps even a Christian one. But society *must* be pluralistic and multicultural, and none of the stories may dominate. There must be freedom and equality for the adherents of all of them. Postmodernists say that this is indeed the desire of our society. That is why they define our age as the age of *incredulity* towards metanarratives.

When rejecting metanarratives, postmodernists are probably thinking first of all of the Christian and modern-scientific ones, although apparently Hitler-Germany is also used as an example. They are wrong, however, to include the German one among modern metanarratives, for as was pointed out earlier, National Socialism was not a modern but a postmodernist experiment. Marxism, on the other hand, does constitute a typically modern metanarrative, and it certainly was totalizing, cruel, and oppressive. Lyotard himself, who has turned his back on communism, and several other postmodernists admit that. But postmodernism does not speak with one voice when dealing with communism, for not every postmodernist has rejected the Marxist creed in its totality.

An evaluation

What are we to say of these things? We have to agree with postmodernists on the important role that world-views, metanarratives, grand stories, or whatever you want to call them, have played throughout history. Postmodernists were, of course, not the first to notice their importance. Christians, instructed by the Scriptures, have long drawn attention to the need to discern the spirits which are abroad in our societies — and that certainly includes the spirits of the age, the prevailing world-views.

We rejoice with postmodernists that the spell of a variety of secular world-views has been broken. I refer not only to such metanarratives as National Socialism and Marxism, but also to the scientist-progressive one. In many ways that was, in a spiritual sense, the most dangerously seductive world-view, one that has greatly influenced also Christian believers. For have we not all been under the spell of the gospel of scientific infallibility and progress, even when we fought it? We have reason to be grateful for the exposure of this metanarrative as a modern myth — although we certainly do not subscribe to the irrationalism and denial of truth which underlie the postmodernist rejection of science.

Postmodernists are also right when they speak of a general *incredulity* toward metanarratives. Faith in the modern narrative of progress through science is indeed declining, and leading scientists complain that fewer young people than before turn to the study of pure science. They prefer the applied kind, such as engineering and computer technology. The National-Socialist and Marxist metanarratives are, in many parts of the world, as good as dead — although it would be premature to say that they are incapable of being revived. Even democratic political theories such as socialism, liberalism, and conservatism are, generally speaking, no longer able to excite people. All of them stress practical outcomes rather than principles, and as a result it is becoming more and more difficult to distinguish among them. But perhaps we should not look only to the outside environment for examples. Does the spirit of the age not have an effect on the church as well? I am thinking, for example, of a widespread desire to emphasize Christian action and experience at the expense of doctrine. We will come back to this.

In short, then, I think that postmodernists have a point when they say that many of the traditional metanarratives are under attack.[31] At the same time I believe that they are naive in believing that the age of metanarratives *as such* is past. Humanity has never been able to live without a world-view, and postmodern humanity is no exception to the rule. Unless they believe in God, men and women will either cling to the scientific metanarratives of modern times — and many people still do exactly that — or they will turn to postmodernist alternatives. As I already suggested, postmodernism itself is in the process of becoming a metanarrative, an overarching world-view.

And that is not at all reassuring. If we keep in mind the irrationalism and anti-humanism of many manifestations of postmodernism,

the fragmentation and tribalization it encourages, and the postmodern interest in the occult and in paganism — then we realize that the replacement of the modern metanarrative by a postmodernist one is cause for deep concern. Hitler-Germany has made that clear.

It may be good to stop for a minute and consider the German phenomenon, for it serves as a warning. The Nazis despised modernism, also the many things that were good in it, such as the belief in civil rights and freedoms, democracy, human dignity, compassion for the downtrodden, and the inherent equality of all peoples and all races. National Socialism rejected all these things. It also rejected modern secularism and atheism. But rather than turning back to Christianity, it sought inspiration in Germany's pre-christian past. As we saw in a previous lecture, Hitler and his kin tried to bring Germanic paganism back. What they accomplished, however, was something far worse. For you cannot move from paganism to modern secularism and then back to the old paganism. And neither can you throw the demon of modernism out of your house, clean up the place, and expect that it will remain unoccupied.

This can't be done because people can't live without a metanarrive, no matter what Lyotard and other postmodernists say. People either replace the secular metanarrative with the Christian one, or they open themselves up to something much more evil than the old paganism. As we read in Matthew 12: "When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first."

We saw a fulfilment of this in Nazi Germany. The one demon of post-christian secularism was replaced by the seven demons of neo-paganism. It may happen again in an apostate West. It may also happen in non-western countries. For, as Berkhof tells us, under God's providence the old pagan powers served a necessary function, but that function was limited to what the Bible calls the times of ignorance. Their absolute rule must be replaced by the rule of Christ. And if that does not happen, if paganism is rejected in favour of secularism and, after that, in favour of a kind of neo-paganism, then the final condition of the non-western world also will be worse than it was before it became acquainted with Christianity. An age of neo-paganism, wherein rulers are supplied with

the kind of technology that mankind is now able to develop, is a terrible prospect indeed.

2. Postmodernism and Christianity

We turn to our second section, the relationship between postmodernism and the Christian religion. I have to begin by saying that this relationship is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, the attitude of many postmodernists toward Christianity is one of hostility. These people reject Christianity as the religion that founded and shaped western civilization; for them it is first and foremost the religion of the white, western, patriarchal society. They reject it also because of its absolute claims. Postmodernists preach tolerance, but they are intolerant of those who refuse to subscribe to their creed that all religions are equal. But although the intolerance of many postmodernists must be admitted, it is also true that the movement as such is more open toward the supernatural than modernism was. Faith is again allowed, and spirituality is in. In that respect Christians are more in the mainstream today than they were under late-modernism. And this implies, among other things, that there are opportunities for the proclamation of the Christian message in a postmodern world.

The rejection of the cult of scientism

Another positive development under postmodernism is the declining faith in what I have called the cult of scientific objectivism, which was at the core of the modernist world-view. This decline is of importance for Christians, and also for biblical scholarship. Let me explain. The modern age (the nineteenth century in particular) witnessed the flourishing of the so-called higher biblical criticism. The majority of the higher critics did not want to eliminate Christianity. On the contrary, they wanted to rescue it from what they thought was a threatening oblivion, but they were convinced that this could only be done if it became fully 'rational.' It had to be in tune with the state of scientific knowledge and the modern view of reality. They therefore subjected the Bible to a 'scientific' critique by applying the so-called historical-critical method to the biblical record. That method left no room for the supernatural element in the Bible. The miracles recorded in the New Testament were either eliminated or treated as myths — that is, as expressions of the beliefs that were held by the early church, but that had no base in reality. Although these myths had been important for the

early Christians, they could no longer be considered true in a scientific age. Critics therefore proceeded to 'demythologize' the Bible, to remove all the so-called myths.

The historical-critical method has been destructive of the Christian faith. Indeed, it may have made as many victims as Darwin's theory of evolution, which arose in the same century. The seductiveness of the higher criticism was a result of the almost universal conviction that what science declared was objectively true. If faith and science clashed, faith had to go, and since science declared the Bible to be largely mythical and definitely time-bound, then it *was* largely mythical and definitely time-bound. One could not gainsay it. One did not quarrel with the pronouncements of science.

As we noted earlier, it is this unquestioning faith in the so-called scientific method, this cult of scientism, that in our postmodern period has come under attack. This does not mean that it has disappeared. In fact, the higher criticism is still being taught at liberal seminaries. Yet it is old-fashioned. Postmoderns point to the naivety of modernism in presuming that from its Olympian heights it could pass judgment on the beliefs and traditions of all other times and cultures. While calling the Bible culturally conditioned, modernists failed to realize that their own certainties — their faith in naturalism and in the universal validity of the scientific method — were also culturally conditioned, and therefore time-bound.

This criticism is a valid one, and Christians must not ignore it. Let me therefore repeat it. Faith in naturalism and in the universal validity of what is considered to be the scientific method — that is, the belief that we can have no true knowledge of anything beyond the material world, and that the only way to knowledge and truth is by observation and the use of our critical reason — that faith is a construct of a particular historical period, a period that is now receding into history. It is true that the old view is still being preached at many schools and universities and that it is still being disseminated via the media. As a result, it is also a long time a-dying in popular culture. But it is on the way out. It has, if only we knew it, lost the power to imprison us.

3. Faith as personal knowledge

For some, I know, the loss of faith in scientific objectivity is disturbing. If even science can't be considered a hundred percent objective,

these people complain, then surely all things are relative. Then we can simply believe what we feel like believing, also in religious matters.

This is indeed the conclusion that various postmodernists draw, but I assure you that there is no basis for it. It is a result of the western either-or, all-or-nothing approach, to which I referred earlier. In this case it means that *either* we believe that we can have absolute truth, *or*, if that can't be had, we believe that there is absolutely no truth.[32] But the fact that we know in part does not mean that we do not know at all. Nor does it mean that all things are equally true or false. There are reality checks. Theories can be tested for adequacy. This applies in science, in history, in political theory. It applies, although in a different sense, also to religious knowledge. Faith, we read in Hebrews 11, "is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

How does faith give us that assurance and certainty? In a recent publication Lesslie Newbigin, an English missionary who has devoted several books to cultural criticism, draws a distinction between analytical and scientific knowledge on the one hand, and interpersonal knowledge on the other.[33] In both cases there is a relationship. Following the approach and terminology of the philosopher Martin Buber, a German existentialist, Newbigin speaks of an *I-It*, and an *I-Thou* relationship. The *I-It* relationship applies when scientists, historians, sociologists, and others — scholars and laymen both — study something or someone as an object, a thing. Here the knower, the *I*, is in control, and the object of knowledge is simply an *It*, something to be dissected or classified or otherwise analysed. The analysis is objective in the sense that it can be repeated by others and perhaps even empirically tested.

In the second case, that of the *I-Thou* relationship, the *I* does not control the other but sees him as a person, a *Thou*. He submits to that *Thou*, opens up to him, and listens to him. There is an interpersonal relationship here, and there is mutual knowledge. It is non-objective knowledge; it cannot be empirically tested, and like all human knowledge it is partial, but it is knowledge nevertheless. Anyone who loves someone knows that he or she *knows* that person. Nor would he or she ever think that that person is not for real.

The people of the historical-critical method approached the Bible as an object. God's revelation to us, however, is the revelation of a Person, and it is addressed to us as persons. God tells us to listen to Him, to trust and obey Him, to respond to Him. There is an *I-Thou*, a personal

relationship. I know that we must be careful when speaking of a mutual relationship between the Creator and the creature, lest we create the impression that God and man are equal partners. They are not. But it remains true that God allows us to know Him as a Person, and that He speaks to us as persons: as a father to his children, as a husband to his wife, a bridegroom to his bride, a friend to his friend. The relationship is a personal one. Indeed, the relationship between God and the believer is even more intimate than is possible among human beings, for God gave us what humans cannot give to each other: He gave us His Spirit. The knowledge we have by faith is altogether different from that which we acquire by means of science, but it is by no means less certain. It depends on commitment and submission. As the Lord Himself said: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7.17). Faith and commitment go together. Without commitment, there is no certainty.[34]

These insights are not typically postmodern. They are biblical truths, and as such they have been confessed by believers throughout human history, also during the modern period. But they were in danger of being obscured by the pervasive modern cult of scientific objectivism, and postmodern thinkers — Christians and non-Christians both — have been instrumental in unmasking that cult, reminding us that there are more ways to knowledge and truth than the scientific one. They are in essence repeating the maxim of the seventeenth-century philosopher Blaise Pascal that "the heart has its reasons of which reason does not know." There has been much discussion on the question what Pascal meant when speaking of the knowledge of the heart. I think that he was referring to faith, but not to faith as merely intellectual assent. For Pascal faith was existential, which means that it involved the entire person, body and soul, intellect and emotions. That is how the Bible also describes faith and faith knowledge.

4. Faith, doctrine, and experience

In our days the desire for a lived faith and for religious experience is strong. We find it in our own churches. Increasing numbers of people are interested less in systematic theology than in a gospel message that sets the heart on fire. It is one of the reasons for the appeal that evangelical and even charismatic churches have among us. I believe that the stress on the existential and the experiential components of faith is a

good development, a necessary corrective of a way of believing that ran the danger of being too one-sidedly concerned with the intellectual aspect. Faith must be lived; it must make the believer joyful; and it must prove itself by works and a life of gratitude.

Yet the new trend is not without its own danger of one-sidedness. Faith is not simply a matter of the emotions; it is also a matter of the mind. As Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism expresses it, faith is both a firm confidence and a sure knowledge – a knowledge of God's saving acts as He revealed them in His Word. If the knowledge part is forgotten, we run the risk of downplaying the need to pay close attention to what God objectively tells us in His Word. That is, we run the risk of succumbing to relativism and subjectivism, placing our own insights, and the fulfilment of our emotional needs, before the search for truth. In the end, we lose the truth.

That danger is as great in our postmodern times as it has ever been, for, as we have noted on more than one occasion, our culture is a therapeutic one. The desire to feel good is behind the tendency, for example, to reinterpret the Bible in such a way as to accommodate radical feminists and homosexuals. It is also behind the consumerist attitude of those Christians who pick and choose only what suits them in the Christian religion. But the Bible teaches, and history makes it clear, that if Christians turn their brains off and try to live on feelings alone, or even on feelings and piety and good works alone, they will lose such certainties as they thought they had, for they will lose the Scriptures. Here also, we must be careful not to fall into an either-or attitude. Faith and experience go together.

But perhaps I am stressing experience more than I should. Faith, that is trust and obedience, must remain also when it is accompanied by no feelings. C. S. Lewis once expressed that biblical truth well. Those of you who have read his *Screwtape Letters* will remember the advice that the senior devil Screwtape gave to his junior helper Wormwood, who had boasted that his intended victim, a young Christian, appeared to be losing his religious enthusiasm. Screwtape warned Wormwood (in letter VIII) not to be deceived, adding, "Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's [that is: God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."

5. Narrative preaching

We now turn to the point I skipped earlier, namely the postmodern tendency to stress the narrative element in homiletics. That approach is widely recommended among theologians and preachers, also among conservative ones. Dr. C.Trimp, emeritus professor of the Theological University in Kampen, tells us that narrative preaching is for many an alternative to dogmatic, argumentative, moralizing, and legalistic types of preaching.[35] It is attractive because it allows for greater participation by the audience. One can live oneself 'into' the story.

Narrative preaching is also appealing because it is livelier than the more dogmatic type, and provides many illustrations of the truths of the faith. To borrow the example used by an English author: it is possible to express the truth that salvation is 'by grace through faith' by stating it as a doctrine, as Paul did, for example, in his Letter to the Romans. But it is also possible to illustrate this truth in a more vivid manner by expressing it in narrative or story form, as the Lord Jesus did in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple (Luke 18.9-14).[36]

Furthermore, on many occasions the Bible does speak in story-form. Indeed, the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, can and must be read as a narrative. God reveals Himself as the God of past and present and future. There is a *history* of salvation. True religion is not the product of philosophy, as the ancient Greeks (and some of their Christians followers) thought. Nor is it the religion of an unchanging, non-historical physical nature, as most pagans believed. God is the God of history, who makes Himself known in history. And history implies narrative. Therefore preaching must tell the 'story' of God's great deeds.

How true this is was brought home to me these days when speaking here in Australia with people who have done missionary work in Papua New Guinea and Irian Jaya. These men and women make it clear that you don't begin your work there with an exposition of systematic theology, or even with the confessions. That comes later, in some cases much later. You begin by telling the *story* of God's walk with His people. This is the proper approach. We follow it also with small children. More importantly, the Lord Himself, as we saw, follows the approach. He chose to reveal Himself by means of the story of his dealings with the world and with His covenant people. And He continues to reveal Himself in that way. Not only new converts in heathen lands, and not only small children, but all of us must live by the story told us in the Bible.

But it must also be kept in mind that the Bible is not merely narrative. It speaks of historical events, and historical events are not simply to be related, they must also be explained and interpreted. Furthermore, care must be taken that in the biblical context 'story' is not equated with fiction. Trimp warns us that postmodernists often turn to narrative theology not in order to stress the historical character of revelation, but for the opposite reason. Narrative theology developed, he tells us, as a postmodern reaction to the modern historical-critical approach to the Scriptures. That approach, it is now realized, does not work. I cannot go into the various reasons for this failure but I will use an example to illustrate it. Many modern theologians tried to produce a portrait of what they called the 'historical Jesus,' a 'biography' from which all supernatural elements had been removed. But all that these critics achieved was producing a Jesus who resembled their own particular ideologies. As one commentator put it, the critics looked into the deep well of history to find a 'historical Jesus,' but they in fact saw their own faces reflected at the bottom. They created a Jesus in their own image.

Since modernist attempts at historical reconstruction have failed, postmodernists feel free to leave history out of the picture altogether. They adopt the modernist idea that the Bible story is simply a record of the Old and New Testament believers' 'experience' of God. Whether or not the biblical events really happened is irrelevant. The Bible is 'true' in so far as it speaks to us, in our particular situation. And because this is the only criterion of biblical truth, the hearers and the readers can 'enter' into the story, 'participate' in it, and change it according to their desires. Reader-response criticism (in the radical sense of the term) ties in with this approach. So does its even more radical cousin, deconstructionism — the attempt of feminists, gays, and their allies to 'reinterpret' the Bible in such a way that it supports their ideas.

6. Redemptive-historical preaching

In connection with narrative homiletics I want to make a few remarks about the approach to preaching that is generally followed in our churches, namely the redemptive-historical one. That approach was revitalized in the years before and since the Liberation of 1944 in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. It is being stressed by many Reformed theologians in opposition to a radically subjective, experiential type of preaching on the one hand, and to the so-called exemplaristic method on the other.

The former focuses on the listener's *experience* of faith and salvation, making that the criterion for the genuineness and certainty of faith. The latter, in dealing with the historical material of the Old Testament, focuses attention on Bible figures in order to use them as moral examples for believers today. These figures are removed from the larger context of God's redemptive acts in history. Exemplaristic preachers speak of Abraham, for example, not to point to his place in God's history of redemption, but to illustrate the importance and nature and consequences of a personal faith. Redemptive-historical preaching, on the other hand, stresses the wider context of God's acts in history. Because of this it is, more so than both the experiential and the exemplaristic approaches, Christological. There is a direct line from Old Testament events to Christ, the centre of all history.

The redemptive-historical approach has, as you will have noted, similarities with the narrative one while avoiding its dangers. Indeed, it makes a point of stressing the *historicity* of the Old Testament. Recently, however, warnings have been raised against a one-sided emphasis on the redemptive-historical aspect. Dr. C. Trimp, the one we already met, is the main spokesman for this concern. As Dr. J. DeJong writes in an article on the redemptive-historical method,[37] Trimp has expressed the fear that a single-minded stress on the wider context may lead to the unwarranted loss of the entire experiential aspect. To take Abraham again as an example, redemptive-historical preachers in their sermon might place all the emphasis on Abraham's role in connection with the coming of Christ. But in that case (and now I quote DeJong's summary of Trimp's position) ". . . the concept of *friendship* with respect to God's relationship with Abraham fell into the background. Yet these are elements which must be highlighted, because they show the *style* of the God of the covenant in His relationship with His people" [emphases added].

Neglecting to heed these examples, Trimp believes, entails the danger of ignoring the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing about faith and regeneration. It also entails the danger of ignoring the "experiential power of faith in the promise of God."[38] That power is described (in Old Testament narratives but also in the New Testament, for example in Hebrews 11) for the instruction and encouragement of believers. To use Old Testament figures as examples is therefore not to push the Lord's work into the background, but to show His ways of dealing with His people.

Trimp believes that we must give attention not only to the *history* of salvation, but also to the *order* of salvation. The order of salvation,

which is the work of the Spirit of Christ in the believer, can in fact be called the personal history of salvation. For preaching must not only be Christological, it must give attention to the work of the Triune God: that of Father, Son, and Spirit. In short, while moralistic preaching is to be avoided, the use of the example has a legitimate place in the context of redemptive-historical preaching.[39]

I mention Trimp's work on the experiential aspect of faith and preaching because it serves as another example of what I believe are positive postmodern influences. But I should be careful with my terminology here, for believers throughout history have known that faith has an experiential dimension. We are invited to *taste* and *see* that the Lord is good; that the man who trusts in Him will indeed experience this goodness (Ps. 34). Believers have experienced it, also modern ones. Nevertheless, as Trimp suggests, the experiential aspect may have been underexposed among us in modern times. If so, the postmodern stress on personal knowledge serves as a corrective.

7. Conclusion

In this lecture we have again noted the complex nature of the postmodern phenomenon. On the one hand there are positive aspects. I have tried to point them out more than once — for example when speaking of postmodernism's humanitarianism and its attitude toward the environment, and also when giving attention to the postmodern awareness of our emotive needs. Modernism tended to be one-sidedly intellectualistic and analytical. By stressing the emotive and the holistic and synthetic elements, postmodernism serves as a corrective.

Perhaps most important among the positive contributions of our postmodern times is the challenge to the modernist faith in scientific objectivism as the one and only road to truth and the infallible cure for all our ills. I have mentioned this contribution a number of times, and I am mentioning it again, for I am afraid that the message is not well known, not among members of the general public and not in our own circles either. But we should pay attention to it. It should be written about, and it should be taught in our schools. The tyranny of the modernist cult has lasted long enough, and it has done more than enough damage.

Postmodernism, I said, is a complex phenomenon. The positive aspects come side by side with the negative ones. How do we separate them? A helpful device, followed by more than one commentator, is to

distinguish between postmodern*ity* and postmodern*ism*. There are postmodern thinkers who do not subscribe to the radical ideas of their postmodernist contemporaries, but who nevertheless agree with them in rejecting such one-sidednesses of modernism as its excessive intellectualism and its cult of scientism. But they do so without falling into the nihilistic trap of concluding that there is no truth, and that all human pursuits are mere power games. Michael Polanyi, whom we met in the first lecture, is such a postmodern thinker, but there are many more, among philosophers of science and in other areas, including, as we noticed, the fields of orthodox theology and preaching.

Postmodern thinkers, as I define the term, do not reject western civilization either. Although aware of its many shortcomings, they appreciate and are grateful for the great benefits it has brought to the peoples of the West, and indeed to humanity as a whole. They do not want it to be destroyed; they want it to be cured of its shortcomings. Nor do they despise reason and science, although they oppose the modernist idolization of both. Often these postmodern thinkers go beyond the modern period to pre-modern Christianity, drawing inspiration from insights that got obscured in modernism. This explains the continuing interest in theologians like Luther and Calvin, and in early Christian scholars like Augustine. None of these pre-modern Christians despised the intellect. When Augustine said that unless we believe we shall not understand, he was not propounding an anti-intellectual creed. He simply refused to admit the *autonomy* of human reason.

The same goes for John Calvin, who began his studies as a Renaissance scholar, and for Martin Luther. Much has been made of Luther's remark that reason is 'the devil's whore.' It has served to place him in the camp of the irrationalists, but wrongly so. Luther distinguished between reason as a power that stands above revelation, judging it, and reason that submits to revelation, and he allowed only the latter. Postmodern thinkers — also those who do not share Luther's faith — admit the legitimacy of this distinction. They have seen the destructive consequences of an attitude that exalts the critical reason as the infallible and only judge of truth and value.

But again, while rejecting the modern idolization of reason, these postmoderns refuse to subscribe to the postmodernist creed of irrationalism, relativism, and scepticism. They refuse, that is, to adopt an either-or, all-or-nothing attitude — and in this respect also they walk in the ways of

Augustine, Luther, and Calvin. Those men knew that while reason is dangerous as a master, it is indispensable as a servant, in theology as in all other human pursuits. For God created us as rational beings.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, rejects reason in any form, because it rejects truth in any form. If the religion of science was at the core of modernism, this irrationalism and this denial of truth constitute the essence of postmodernist thought. And I am afraid that these postmodernist ideas exert as powerful an influence in our society as did the modernist cult of scientific objectivism and autonomous reason.

They are certainly more powerful than those of the moderate postmoderns. Relativism is *the* sickness of our times. All certainties are under attack today, secular as well as religious ones. The only certainty left is that there is no certainty. This relativism defines our world-view, the climate of opinion of our time, the spirit of our age. And therefore it does not fail to affect the church. It explains the increasing disbelief in what postmodernists call the Christian metanarrative, and the stress among many Christians on experience and action *at the expense of* doctrine.

The pervasiveness of this postmodernist relativism poses a threat not only to young people in the church, although they are especially prone to be affected by it. This stands to reason, for they are exposed to postmodernist influences far more than their elders. They drank them in, so to say, with their mother's milk. And the question demanding our attention is: how are we to deal with these relativistic influences, these questionings of what were always believed to be undoubted truths?

In these lectures I have concentrated on one strategy. It is that we make sure we know what is going on in our culture, so that we can test the spirits. This means that we will be able to analyse the need for experience in our therapeutic culture, expose its roots, and at the same time pay heed to the demand. It also means that we will be able to meet the relativistic arguments that abound today. For it won't do to respond to the questions with which young (or older) people come with the simple imperative: "Don't question everything! You must believe!" Of course they must, but they still need answers to their questions. As every parent and teacher knows, young people want reasons. Even young children want them, witness their interminable "why" questions. The need for answers to questions about the faith often increases exponentially among older ones, those in the senior grades of elementary school and those of high school and college age. And they are right in

asking for answers, including rational ones. For Christianity is a reasonable faith.

The above has bearings for Christian education, as I hope to show in more detail in subsequent lectures. At this point I will only mention my conviction that schools should acquaint students with the past of their civilization: its history, including the history of language and literature, of geography and mathematics and science. Students must be given opportunities to gain non-contemporary perspectives on things, because only so can they escape the tyranny, the prison-house, of the present.

In the course of their studies they should also be shown, wherever possible, that the temptations of our times are not new. Heresies do not die, they are recycled. The study of past ages and of its literature and other texts can be a means to show our young people that there have been men and women facing similar temptations to the ones they face, and that these people did not succumb but found a way out. In other words, it will show them that Christians can live, as Christians, in an age like ours; that they have answers to the challenges posed by a non-believing, relativistic, atheistic world. And also that they have a message of salvation for that same world. For in our concern for our own people we may not forget the needs of our unbelieving, harassed, and lost contemporaries.

And finally, but not in the last place, young people must have the moral and spiritual support of their elders and their church community. Their concerns and their questions must be taken seriously. Few young people, if any, question faith and doctrine just to be obnoxious. Those among you who have themselves gone through intellectual crises of faith (and who has not?) know how painful they can be. They also know how truly comforting it is to meet Christians who understand, because they have met the same problems and met them head-on; Christians who experienced the intellectual challenges but who kept the faith. And who *model* that faith. For this shows that Christ is indeed in control, also in our postmodern world, and that He is fully able to protect His own. If our encounter with postmodernism teaches us these things, then that encounter is worth it.