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Author's Response to James J. Buckley

[Henry H. Knight, III](#)

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1. I appreciate very much this careful and gracious review. The questions Dr. Buckley raises are significant, and I hope my response will do them justice.

He begins by asking if the subtitle ("Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World") more accurately reflects the content of the book than the title ("A Future for Truth"). Dr. Buckley has read my intent and the book's content accurately—this is indeed a post-critical evangelical theology, not a philosophical defense of the concept of truth. So why this title? I wanted to argue for the future of the truth of the gospel in a postmodern world, and for the intelligibility of the Christian claim that such truth is universal. In so doing I tried to show why Christians make such a claim (that is, that Jesus Christ is not just their Savior and Lord but is everyone's), how biblical narrative makes truth claims, and how this truth is manifested in the life of the church. The title, then, refers not to truth in general but the very distinctive truth claims of Christianity.

2. I began the story of evangelicalism at the Protestant Reformation because it is there that the story most properly begins. Of course this is misleading if it is taken to mean there were no prior influences leading to the emergence of Protestantism, or worse that all prior Christianity is somehow to be set aside (a view foreign to Luther and Calvin). It would also be wrong to think that none of this prior history has had an influence on subsequent evangelicalism. But it does seem to me that one value held in common by most evangelicals is fidelity to a number of central Protestant Reformation concerns, and by beginning the story there I could identify what those concerns were.

3. While I am certain none of the Reformations were ideal, I am not at all convinced they were so internally flawed that they were destined to go awry. That they did go awry is at least in part due to historical reasons. It does seem to me that Protestant scholasticism tended to sever the link between theology and life that is evident in Luther and Calvin. Pietism and Puritanism at their best sought to recover that linkage. What I resist is the overly simplified claim that the scholastics were rationalists while pietists were experiential. Instead, I argue that each had a place for reason and experience, but related them in quite different ways.

4. Modern thought presupposes a conflict between reason and emotion (thus denying their integration) and then tempts us to read their presumed conflict back into history. Thus we misunderstand not only pietists (both Protestant and Catholic) but patristic ascetics and theologians as well. I believe Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley perceptively resisted this passion/reason conflict through their "spiritual sense" epistemologies and descriptions of the Christian life in terms of "affections" or "tempers." Hence, along with others such as Don Saliers, I urge a contemporary recovery of their more holistic anthropology as a way forward.

5. I do not see my approach as a pietist mirroring of a romanticism because of the particularity of Christian experience. That is, the content of the affections (and hence the shape of the Christian life) is decisively determined by their object. Thus love for the God revealed in Jesus Christ is necessarily distinct from love for some other divinity, because the divinities themselves are descriptively different. It is likewise different from love for money, prestige, etc., as is the life that results from this love.

6. To put it differently: I am not talking here about a universal religious experience that is subsequently shaped by a religious culture, nor of a set of virtues defined apart from a particular narrative and community. These affections are intrinsically relational, and are shaped in accordance with their objects. Experience here is not "subjective" in origin but in response to a God who is "other," a God known through faith (the point of the "spiritual sense" epistemologies).

7. This is why I then emphasize means of grace such as scripture, prayer, and eucharist as well as the interrelated categories of narrative, metaphor and community. It is through participation in these that a relationship with this particular God is maintained, and the affections shaped and deepened over time by the Holy Spirit. Rather than an Enlightenment Romanticism I see my proposal more like—dare we say—a kind of Barthian experientialism.

8. My interest in biblical narrative is linked to this, because it is (along with liturgy) the most suitable medium to convey the character and agency of God. That is, narrative does more than give us information about God—as we encounter God through biblical narrative we come to know God, and our lives are shaped accordingly.

9. But to appropriate narrative this centrally I have to address a central question: is the narrative true? Rational propositionalists insist that only propositions can be true. I respond by both denying that only propositions can be true (which I claim is bias of Enlightenment rationalism) and by showing how narratives are in fact more able to truthfully convey the character and agency of God than propositions. This is my point when I argue that "language of historical fact is necessarily inadequate and misleading" when it attempts to account for the character and agency of God" (109). Narrative (and metaphor) in scripture conveys this more adequately because it "is both necessarily inadequate to its diving object and abundantly rich in its description of God" (112). The correspondence between text and God is real, but not one-to-one (as a propositionalist would insist).

10. There are, however, certain claims biblical narrative makes which, if historically untrue, would undermine the truth of the gospel. I am not, therefore saying all questions of propositional truth are irrelevant. What I am saying is that the narrative itself makes certain central truth claims that are historical, and that to deny these to deny the truth of the narrative. The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is the most obvious of these truth claims.

11. My concern in all this was neither to integrate propositionalism with narrativism nor to lay the truth of both side by side. Rather it was to take seriously the concerns of propositionalism for truth but to answer that concern from within a narrative approach. This in turn illumines not only how narrative makes truth claims but the sort of historical claims that must be the case if the narrative is to be true. This means that the truthfulness of biblical narrative involves more than the kind of communities it produces—there is an inescapable historical component because it is a narrative of a God who acts in and indeed enters history.

12. On the matter of sin and grace Dr. Buckley is certainly right about the Eastern perspective on the West. I was not endorsing Pinnock because of his appropriation of the East but defending him from the charge that he has based his view of human freedom in the autonomous individualism of the Enlightenment. My own position (here different from Pinnock) is to "take with utmost seriousness both human agency and the Protestant insistence on total corruption," while retaining much of Pinnock's "freewill theism." It is here that Berkouwer and Wesley may prove helpful. Thus my preference for Pinnock's "freewill theism" is not uncritical, and while I do defend him from Bloesch at points at the same time I try to take into account Bloesch's concerns.

13. Dr. Buckley's concern about my claim that faithful Christian communities would be "the only evidence" of the truth of the gospel is well-taken. What I was intending here was two related points: (1) if what we claim about Jesus Christ is in fact true, then the transforming effect of that gospel should be visible in those communities that distinctively worship, and serve in his name, and (2) in a postmodern world the existence of such communities will be the most persuasive case for the truth of the gospel.

14. By focusing on the specific questions raised by Dr. Buckley I have not adequately acknowledged his many other insightful comments. I am grateful for these and for the opportunity not only to clarify my argument but to think through the important issues which his review so helpfully identifies.

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