

1996

A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method

Elmer M. Colyer

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, ecolyer@univ.dbq.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr>

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Colyer, Elmer M. (1996) "A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol1/iss1996/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal for Christian Theological Research by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. For more information, please contact akeck001@luthersem.edu.

A Theology of Word and Spirit: Donald Bloesch's Theological Method

[Elmer M. Colyer](#)

The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary

I. Bloesch's Biography

1. Donald G. Bloesch is undoubtedly one of North America's foremost evangelical theologians. The theological dexterity and panoramic scholarship evident in his two-volume classic, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, not only earned Bloesch a reputation as an outstanding and creative thinker, it made him one of the most quoted evangelical theologians in the United States.
2. Yet Bloesch did not always consider himself an evangelical. In fact, he has always had reservations about evangelical theology. It is for this reason that some of his most pointed critics have been others within the evangelical family--a family often fractured by in-house feuds.
3. Bloesch was born in Bremen, Indiana, in 1928.¹ His father was a pastor in the local German Evangelical Church, part of the Evangelical Synod of North America which had its roots in Lutheran and Reformed Pietism. Both of Bloesch's grandfathers were also pastors in the Evangelical Synod. They came to the United States from Switzerland as missionaries to German speaking immigrants. Bloesch's family heritage is firmly rooted in Pietism.
4. The Evangelical Synod merged with the Reformed Church in the United States in 1934 to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church which later joined the Congregational Christian Churches creating the United Church of Christ in 1957. Bloesch remains a member of the UCC, though at times a disgruntled member, disturbed by what he considers latitudinarian tendencies within the denomination.
5. In 1946, Bloesch entered Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, the preparatory school for pre-theological students in the Evangelical and Reformed Church, where Bloesch majored in philosophy. Most students at Elmhurst College intent on entering the ministry in the Evangelical and Reformed Church continued on to Eden Theological Seminary. Bloesch chose Chicago Theological Seminary partly because of his growing interest in sociology of religion, but also on account of his desire to pursue Ph.D. studies. At CTS Bloesch could proceed directly on to the doctoral program once he had completed his Bachelor of Divinity degree.
6. Despite his broad exposure to theology and philosophy in his undergraduate studies, Bloesch was not prepared for what he describes as "the extreme liberal theology" he encountered at CTS. Most of the theologians there "identified themselves as neo-naturalists and appealed to the writings of Alfred North Whitehead" (*Autobiography* 11). There Bloesch discovered neo-orthodoxy which has played a pivotal role in his theological development. In seminary he read major works by Kierkegaard, Brunner, Barth, Tillich and Bultmann, with favorable reaction, though Bloesch gradually shifted his allegiance to Brunner and especially Karl Barth. Bloesch did not consider any of the leading evangelical theologies in America at the time to be viable options because their rationalist approaches were inadequate in the face of the kinds of problems created for traditional theology which Bloesch encountered in his study of modern philosophy and theology.
7. After seminary, Bloesch went directly into Ph.D. studies at the University of Chicago. He wrote his dissertation on Reinhold Niebuhr's apologetics.

8. In the fall of 1957 Bloesch began his thirty-five year teaching career at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. The Administration hired Bloesch to counteract the influence of the noted Barthian theologian, Art Cochrane, assuming that Bloesch would reflect the regnant neo-natural theology of his *alma mater*, the University of Chicago. Throughout his early years as a professor, Bloesch's theology has gradually shifted from a mild existentialist Neo-orthodoxy to his mature catholic and Reformed evangelicalism.

9. After six years at UDTS, Bloesch married Brenda Mary Jackson, a charming British woman he had met while studying in Geneva, Switzerland. Brenda serves as Bloesch's copy-editor and research associate. She is staunchly evangelical and theologically insightful. Brenda has created an environment conducive to the single-minded life of research, reflection and writing they embody in their life together. Few people realize what a strategic role she has played in Bloesch's career as an author.

10. The majority of Bloesch's early books focus on various aspects of Christian renewal. *Centers of Christian Renewal* (1964) and *Wellsprings of Renewal* (1974) deal with renewal through religious communities. *The Reform of the Church* (1970) and *The Invaded Church* (1974) outline a program for reviving the church's life, ministry, and outreach in light of the secularization infiltrating the church. Bloesch's vision for spiritual renewal in the Christian life is found in *The Christian Life and Salvation* (1967), *The Crisis of Piety* (1968), and *The Struggle of Prayer* (1980). Many of Bloesch's other works deal with themes related to this emphasis on renewal.²

11. In May of 1993, Bloesch retired from teaching at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary so as to devote all of his energies to completing his new seven-volume systematic theology, *Christian Foundations*. Volumes one, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, two, *Holy Scripture*, and three, *God The Almighty*, are published. The Bloeschs continue to reside in Dubuque where they are currently working on volumes four on Christology and five on Pneumatology. The remaining two volumes deal with Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. Altogether Bloesch has written or edited 29 books and nearly 300 articles.

II. Bloesch's Theological Method

12. According to Bloesch, theology today has veered toward what Martin Buber called "a conceptual letting go of God" in which theology is viewed as a humanly-useful reflection on human experience, but is unable to provide any conceptual or rational content with reference to the "Object" of faith (*Word and Spirit* 11). This is the present danger of the theological left (existentialism, theological liberalism, etc.). Yet Bloesch is dissatisfied with the theological right (fundamentalism and certain strands of evangelicalism) and its pronounced rationalism which identifies the text of the Bible with propositional revelation because of its failure to provide a viable alternative.

13. Thus Bloesch sees the need for an alternative way to do theology, one in continuity with the great tradition of the Church, especially the Protestant Reformation. Bloesch calls his alternative theological approach "a Theology of Word and Spirit":

When I speak of Word and Spirit, I am not thinking primarily of a book that receives its stamp of approval from the Spirit, though I affirm the decisive role of the Spirit in the inspiration and illumination of Scripture. I am thinking mainly of the living Word in its inseparable unity with Scripture and church proclamation as this is brought home to us by the Spirit in the awakening of faith. It is not the Bible as such but divine revelation that confronts us in the Bible that is the basis and source of spiritual authority... Scripture is the Word of God to those with the eyes to see and ears to hear... (*Word and Spirit* 14)

It is the action of the Spirit that brings the Word of God (Jesus Christ) present, yet hidden, in Scripture to light so that people hear and respond in faith.

14. This theme is so pervasive that it occurs at nearly every crucial point of Bloesch's theological method. It represents his attempt to recapture a "sacramental" understanding of revelation, truth, and authority. It also signifies Bloesch's concern to affirm and unite both the objective and subjective poles of revelation. In this way

he hopes to overcome the incessant oscillation between the objective and subjective poles of the knowing relation that is characteristic of theological and philosophical conversation throughout the modern period.³ The rigorous application of this "Word and Spirit" theme throughout the first two volumes of Bloesch's systematic theology leads to some characteristic reformulations of the theological loci covered there.

A. Faith and Reason

15. The relationship between faith and reason is one of the pivotal questions in theological method and a key issue that has divided theologians for centuries. Here Bloesch attempts to overcome the seemingly incompatible polarities of fideism and rationalism (*Word and Spirit* 61).⁴

16. Bloesch locates his position within the classical tradition going back to Augustine of faith seeking understanding, *credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand). For Bloesch faith is not the assent of the will to that which reason has demonstrated to be true. "Reason...in and of itself cannot validate or substantiate the claims of faith" (*Word and Spirit* 60). Rather it is divine grace that brings humanity into contact with the reality of God. The reason for this is not primarily the limitation of reason due to human finitude, but human sin which distorts reason and alienates the whole person from God.

17. Nevertheless, while we do not believe on the basis of our reason, we do not believe without our reason (*Word and Spirit* 58).⁵ Revelation is not the result of human reasoning; yet reason is involved in faith from the very beginning, for revelation "brings about the liberation and transformation of human thought...setting it on a new foundation" (*Word and Spirit* 38). Once liberated, human reason can be of service to Christ, explicating faith's claims, searching Scripture and the tradition of the church in order to better understand and deepen faith, and defending the Gospel from attack and misunderstanding.

18. Bloesch argues that this is not fideism because the ground and starting point is not the act of faith itself, but rather God's action through the Word and Spirit. "Faith does not supply its own content but apprehends the content objectively given in the Word" (*Word and Spirit* 59). Thus, faith is not a naked act of will in which reason is inactive but a rational commitment to an intelligible gospel.

Philosophy and Theology

19. Given Bloesch's view of the relationship between faith and reason, it is not surprising that he is suspicious of philosophy and sees only a limited place for it within theology:

Just as reason is not completed but overturned by revelation, so philosophy, the very human attempt to fathom ultimate reality, finds itself in tension if not in conflict with theology, the faithful explication of God's self-revelation in the sacred history mirrored in Holy Scripture. (*Word and Spirit* 38)

Bloesch can even say that every philosophy "represents a rationalization for a false theology or religion..." (*Word and Spirit* 43). But this is not a full picture of his position.

20. Philosophy is not necessarily an enemy of theology, since the Spirit of God is at work in the world as well as in the church. "It represents the pinnacle of natural human wisdom and as such should be respected" (*Word and Spirit* 49).

21. Bloesch describes his approach to metaphysics and philosophy as "utilitarian." "We use the concepts and imagery drawn from culture, but we...do not let them determine our thinking" (*Word and Spirit* 49). Indeed, when we use these concepts they must be baptized, transformed to their very core. Philosophy is a potential rival of theology, but the partial truths it discovers can be brought into service of theology. Theology can utilize philosophy, but theology should not align itself with a metaphysic drawn from a particular philosophy. In Bloesch's mind, "The deepest threat to faith lies not in philosophy but in the eagerness with which theologians rush to claim philosophical support for the claims of faith" (*Word and Spirit* 49). This kind of appeal to

philosophy is suicidal because it means that theology has turned from its true ground of certainty (the Spirit speaking the Word of God anew through the Scriptures) in its quest for another.

Dialogue With Other Religions?

22. While many theologians today (even some within evangelical ranks) argue that theological method must include dialogue with other world religions,⁶ Bloesch is not convinced. He grants that there is a "hidden Christ" in the great religions and cultures of the world. Yet this Christ "will invariably be misunderstood and confused with the idols of human imagination" (*Word and Spirit* 53).

23. Like his mentor, Karl Barth, Bloesch sees God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ as standing in judgement over all religions, including institutional Christian faith. True religion exists, but only as it is constantly reformed and purified by the holy grace of God in Jesus Christ (*Word and Spirit* 53). Christian religion ought not proclaim its superiority over other religions, but submit its inadequacies and ambiguities to the judgement of Christ so that it can present an authentic witness to the Gospel for the world.

24. True theology, for Bloesch, is always faith seeking understanding. It begins neither with philosophy nor an examination of the religions of the world, even Christian religion. Yet Bloesch wants to surmount the polarity between fideism and rationalism by an appeal to a theology of Word and Spirit in which "the relationship of faith and reason is not either-or but both-and" (*Word and Spirit* 61). However, since "we must never fail to give priority to the first," in the end Bloesch admits that his position "is probably closer to fideism than to rationalism" (*Word and Spirit* 61).⁷

B. General Revelation and Natural Theology

25. While Bloesch acknowledges that according to Scripture all people have some awareness of God's universal working in nature and history (general revelation), that same biblical witness asserts that this knowledge is suppressed by sinful humanity and is therefore undependable and even deceptive (*Word and Spirit* 160). Bloesch argues that this was the position of many theological luminaries like St. Paul, Calvin, and Barth, though he grants that there have been numerous theologians in the history of Christianity who have made a significant place for general revelation and natural theology.

26. Bloesch, following Hendrikus Berkhof, even suggests that the term "general revelation" should probably be abandoned because of its ambiguity and imprecision. Since revelation is essentially personal encounter, general revelation lacks an essential element constitutive of revelation. Thus Bloesch argues that,

It is probably better to regard this general working of God as an exhibition or display of his [God's] power and goodness than a revelation that effectively unveils or conveys his plan or purpose for our lives...It is appropriate to speak of a general presence of God in nature and history, but this general presence does not become a revelation of his grace and mercy until it is perceived in the light of Jesus Christ. (*Word and Spirit* 164)

This awareness of God is sufficient only to condemn us; it cannot save us.

27. Therefore, like Karl Barth, Bloesch maintains that there can be no valid natural theology or knowledge of God developed on the basis of general revelation. There is no way from nature, history or conscience to God. "Natural theology ends in idolatry because it means constructing a God out of human reason and experience" (*Word and Spirit* 178). The God of natural theology always ends up being fashioned in the image of the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times).

28. Bloesch prefers to speak of a "theology of creation" rather than natural theology:

In place of a natural theology, in which the knowledge of God is based on what we can discover on our own through reason and nature, I propose a theology of creation, in which we analyze nature and

conscience in light of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. (*Word and Spirit* 173)

The "other lights" and "other revelations" in nature and history are not new or different revelations, but really "echoes" or "reverberations" of God's one revelation in Christ which may clarify and illumine what God has done for us in Christ when viewed in the light of Christ.⁸ Rather than try to see God in nature, Bloesch wants to view nature in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. This generates not a natural theology, but a theology of creation which sees the world as created and loved by God, destined for redemption, and the theater of God's glory.

C. Holy Scripture and Revelation

29. One of the more difficult aspects of Bloesch's position is his view of Scripture and revelation. Since there is no valid natural theology grounded in general revelation, if there is to be any theology at all, it will have to proceed on the basis of special revelation.

30. While evangelicals of a conservative stripe have often been content to identify revelation with Scripture, this is not the case with Bloesch. There is no simple relation between the two. Here again, Bloesch finds the Word and Spirit motif pivotal in negotiating the relationship between Scripture and revelation. The Bible is the "divinely prepared medium or channel of divine revelation rather than revelation itself" (*Holy Scripture* 18). Scripture mediates real knowledge of God, but not apart from the activity of the Spirit and faith that arises out of it.

Revelation

31. This particular construal of Scripture and revelation is rooted in Bloesch's conviction that revelation is deeper and wider than the Bible, a conviction which he finds throughout the history of Christian theology, including in the church fathers and the Reformers (*Holy Scripture* 21-23).

32. In order to clarify this it is helpful to ask what, in Bloesch's mind, is the *reality* about which the Bible speaks? What is it that Scripture mediates? The reality the Bible mediates is not propositional truths about God and/or the world, as some evangelicals contend, for this reduces revelation to rational information and knowing the Word of God is little more than understanding the linguistic meaning of the biblical text. Nor is it an ecstatic experience or mysterious presence devoid of cognitive content and expressed in humanly meaningful metaphors or images constructed by the religious imagination.

33. For Bloesch, the *Reality* the Bible mediates is a radical and redeeming encounter with the Living God in which we are confronted by Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel at the core of our being and in the process we are changed, set free for faith and obedience. Thus "revelation is indeed cognitive, but it is much more than this. It is an act of communication by which God confronts the whole person with his redeeming mercy and gracious presence" (*Holy Scripture* 48). The human reception of this revelation or Word of God is both "a rational apprehension and a redeeming experience" (*Holy Scripture* 20).⁹ This, of course, means that Bloesch, like his mentor Karl Barth, advocates a dynamic conception of revelation that emphasizes God's personal Self-disclosure and Self-communication.

34. Here Bloesch is also reintroducing into theology "the critical role of the experience of faith..." (*Word and Spirit* 14). This is why he calls his position a "theology of Word and Spirit" in contrast to Barth's "theology of the Word of God." Bloesch thinks that Barth over-stressed the objective pole of revelation (and also salvation) in his reaction against the subjectivism of Protestant Liberalism, whereas Bloesch wants to affirm and unite the objective and subjective poles of revelation (and salvation).¹⁰

35. However, in stressing the role of the Spirit and the experience of faith, Bloesch is adamant that this is *not* human experience in general or the experience of the oppressed or even religious experience, but rather the experience of coming to faith in which our ordinary experience is transformed and redirected. It is a qualitatively

different experience of forgiveness, of regeneration, that arises from hearing the Gospel, God's act of redemption in Jesus Christ.¹¹

36. Furthermore, the experience of faith is always grounded in the objective side of the Word and Spirit polarity. For Bloesch, "In this era when propositional or conceptual truth is being sacrificed for existential or emotive truth, it is incumbent on theology to reaffirm the conceptual side of divine revelation" (*Word and Spirit* 19). Theology is not grounded in feeling, but on "dogma" or a Word of God which has "an ineradicable propositional dimension," yet can not be reduced to propositions and even bursts through all propositional forms (*Word and Spirit* 274).

37. Thus, in contrast to much of modern theology's emphasis on revelation as non-cognitive experience, Bloesch preserves a strong conceptual element and attempts to integrate this into his doctrine of revelation as an event of God speaking and humans hearing:

Revelation has a personal, a propositional and an experiential pole. What is revealed in a personal presence in conjunction with a spoken or written witness and received by a believing heart. (*Holy Scripture* 42)

Theology must reckon with this fact and develop a hermeneutic and theological method commensurate with the character of revelation.

Holy Scripture

38. The content of the Bible is the mystery of salvation disclosed in God's Self-revelation and Self-communication in Jesus Christ. The biblical writers participated in this event of revelation. But since the impartation of knowledge is subordinated to personal encounter, "revelation is not to be equated with the objective verbal representation of this reception" (*Holy Scripture* 56). While the Holy Spirit guided the writers in their reflection, their articulation of it "is at least one step removed from the revelation itself" (*Holy Scripture* 56). Here Bloesch points to Emil Brunner's distinction between "thought-in-encounter" and "thinking about it."

39. Despite his unwillingness to identify the Bible with revelation itself, Bloesch still says that, "Scripture in itself is the *written* Word of God, comprising by virtue of its divine inspiration a reliable witness to the truth revealed by God in Jesus Christ" (*Holy Scripture* 25).¹² Indeed, Bloesch affirms a high view of the verbal inspiration of Scripture which distinguishes his position from those on the theological left, like Rosemary Ruether, who view the Bible as simply a collection of historical texts codifying the significant religious experience of a particular people. The Bible is God-breathed in that God elected the writers and guided the writing of Scripture, including the compiling, editing and preserving of the biblical text,¹³ yet not in such a way as to supply revelation in propositional form. This inspired reception of revelation does, however, provide a "compelling witness to revelation" and a "unique channel of revelation" (*Holy Scripture* 18, 26-7, 56-7).

40. The Bible has a dual authorship. It is the result of the activity of both infinite God and finite, historical human beings. It is a fully human book, yet it is ontically different than other books because it is inspired by the Spirit of Christ and encompassed by the presence of the Word (*Holy Scripture* 26-7, 128). Scripture can be called the written Word of God, but it only "becomes the *living* Word when it actually communicates to us the truth and power of the cross of Christ through the illumination of the Spirit" (*Holy Scripture* 25-6).

41. This firm distinction between the words of Scripture and revelation allows Bloesch to acknowledge that all of the Bible bears the marks of cultural conditioning and reflects the cultural and historical limitations of its writers (*Holy Scripture* 108, 115). Much of the language of Scripture is highly figurative in character and frequently mythopoetic. Yet the realities this language describes (a fall of humanity in primal history or the resurrection of Christ from the dead) are not mythological (*Holy Scripture* 267).

42. The mythopoetic language of Scripture must not be set aside but interpreted in light of the revelation that it enshrines. Truth shines through myth when it is illumined by the Holy Spirit.

43. This firm distinction between the words of Scripture and the divine revelation also leads Bloesch to reformulate the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. Bloesch freely concedes that there are internal contradictions, historical inaccuracies and theological discrepancies in the Bible, and even misconceptions of God and sub-christian notions of human life and destiny in the Old Testament, though he is reticent to call any of these errors (*Holy Scripture* 111-17).

44. Nevertheless, because the term inerrancy is so freighted with cultural and theological baggage, Bloesch prefers to speak of the "truthfulness or veracity of Scripture rather than of its inerrancy" (*Holy Scripture* 116). What is without error is the divine message spoken by the Holy Spirit through the Bible. Bloesch describes his position as "derivative inerrancy" which indicates the truthfulness of the Bible when the Spirit communicates the very Truth of God through the medium of Scripture. He likewise affirms a "derivative infallibility" in which infallibility lies neither in the letter, nor in the Spirit speaking, but in their paradoxical unity (*Holy Scripture* 116-7).

D. Theological Interpretation of Scripture

45. Bloesch calls his approach to interpretation "a hermeneutic of biblical realism as opposed to a hermeneutic of literalism on the one hand and a hermeneutic of expressivism on the other" (*Holy Scripture* 274). He also describes his position as "the postcritical pneumatic approach of a catholic evangelicalism" (*Holy Scripture* 181).

46. Now Bloesch realizes that, "the task of interpretation would be much easier if the words of the Bible were identical with divine revelation." (*Holy Scripture* 173). But as outlined above, they are not. Since the Bible is a fully human book, Bloesch argues that historical-critical investigation is not simply permitted, but welcomed, though he opposes destructive criticism which approaches the text with presuppositions inimical to faith.

47. Yet while critical historical investigation in its many forms, such as literary, redaction, genre, source and form criticism, is helpful in discovering the natural or original intention of the text and the way the community of faith appropriated it, it cannot procure the Word of God: "Critical scholarship by itself can do little more than cast light on the Bible as a historical document" (*Holy Scripture* 71).¹⁴

48. We must move beyond criticism to "theological exegesis." We venture forth in an attitude of prayer and receptivity in which we are open to the leading of Spirit. Bloesch maintains that

Understanding happens when God's Word speaks to us anew as we submit ourselves to his authority and direction mediated through Scripture. We begin to know when the text becomes transparent to its transcendent meaning through the action of the Spirit in the biblical words and the human heart. (*Holy Scripture* 178)

When Bloesch emphasizes this side of the dialectic, he seems very near to sort of a teleological suspension of all mundane hermeneutic activity so as to enter into pure receptivity toward what the Spirit of God might say to us in the moment and event of revelation.

49. However, this is not precisely what Bloesch intends, for he explicitly states that "We should not thereby conclude that we are passive in the process of understanding" (*Holy Scripture* 179). The "illumination of the Spirit does not contradict the natural sense of the text but clarifies and fulfills this meaning" (*Holy Scripture* 12). Thus we should utilize all our resources and effort in order to discover the meaning of the text and its full significance for our lives, the church and the world--yet all the while realizing that this cannot be truly fruitful apart from the activity of the Spirit.

50. Despite the fact that Bloesch will not identify the Word of God with the words of the Bible there is a sense in which he has an even more realist hermeneutic than those who do. Though God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ cannot be encapsulated in the Bible, through the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit, we become contemporaneous with that Self-revelation again and again.¹⁵ And when this event happens we no longer hear simply an echo of that Word or true propositions about the Word, "but the very Word of God who speaks in and

with the biblical preacher--not by necessity but by an act of free grace" (*Holy Scripture* 58).¹⁶ Indeed, it is this miraculous fact (act?) of grace that makes Christian faith and Christian theology possible.

51. Yet because God's Word is always God's act (the Spirit side of the polarity reasserts itself), it always remains *God's Word*, which only God can speak and which humans can only hear because of the gracious activity of the Spirit. It breaks "into our lives from the beyond and become[s] ours if only for a moment, but then we must seek for it again and again" (*Holy Scripture* 53-4). Thus the interpretation of Scripture is less an art to be learned than a gift of grace to be received (*Holy Scripture* 180). No formula or technique can procure the Word of God. The revelational or spiritual meaning of the text is accessible only to those who "are in experiential contact with the realities to which the text witnesses" (*Holy Scripture* 190).¹⁷ This means that, in Bloesch's view, one must be a believer to be a theologian (*Word and Spirit* 124).

52. Thus theology, from Bloesch's perspective, cannot proceed simply on the basis of the Bible, but only in light of a genuine "hearing" of the Word of God through the Bible as the Holy Spirit brings about an ever-new conjunction between the inspired words of the Scripture and the living Word which only God can speak. Furthermore, while the mystery of salvation disclosed in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ is definitive, human access to this revelation is partial and fragmentary and awaits a future eschatological fulfillment. We know this mystery only brokenly and we are ever dependent on the Spirit bringing us the Word of God again.

E. Theology

53. Theology, for Donald Bloesch, is systematic reflection on, and explication of, God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Yet theology is not properly pursued without taking into account insights gleaned from the witness of the church through the ages and also the contemporary context. In Bloesch's words, "theology is the systematic reflection within a particular culture on the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture and witnessed to in the tradition of the catholic church" (*Word and Spirit* 114).¹⁸

Tradition

54. While there is no question that Holy Scripture (or more precisely divine revelation that comes through the Bible) is the basis and fountal source for all genuine theology, the church has a role to play. For Bloesch, "the role of the church is to clarify and interpret what has already been decisively revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ recorded in Holy Scripture" (*Holy Scripture* 13).

55. This means that the church's theological tradition constitutes an invaluable commentary on Scripture, though it is not an independent source of revelation (*Holy Scripture* 142-158). Bloesch points out that "it was the early church councils that articulated the doctrines of the Trinity and two natures of Christ, which are not explicitly expressed in Scripture but are definitely implied" (*Holy Scripture* 154). Theology should utilize the history of Christian thought, while at the same time testing the tradition of the church in light of Scripture.

Context

56. While theology involves the careful study of the Word of God in light of the church's tradition, it should also entail "an earnest attempt to relate this Word to a particular age and cultural milieu" (*Word and Spirit* 115). Bloesch agrees with Karl Barth's insight that Christians (and theologians) ought to proceed through life with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In this sense theology ought to be both biblical and contextual.

57. Yet there is significant danger here and Bloesch is quick to warn (as he did with reference to place of reason and philosophy in theology) that concern for the cultural context can be carried too far. This is, in fact, one of the great temptations today to which far too many theologies have succumbed.

58. Bloesch is critical of theologies of accommodation intent on finding points of convergence between Christian faith and the highest values of culture. The cry for relevance easily degenerates into a revision of the Christian

message harmonious with prevailing beliefs and attitudes (*Word and Spirit* 252-59).

59. A theology of restoration is also problematic in Bloesch's view. Here the goal is to disengage from modernity and retrieve past positions as viable alternatives for the present. Bloesch classifies this as a Christ-against-culture approach that either withdraws into an evangelical or Catholic ghetto or attacks modernity without seriously entering the debates that have in fact created the modern age (*Word and Spirit* 253-56).

60. Bloesch characterizes his own position as a theology of confrontation in which the relationship between the message of relation and secular wisdom is one of diastasis. The goal is not accommodation nor correlation nor even attack on the basis of a viable position from the past, but rather Christ-transforming-culture, not on the basis of human argumentation, but through the power of the gospel itself (*Word and Spirit* 262-64).¹⁹

61. Such theology will be primarily dogmatic and kerygmatic, not apologetic. The central focus is articulating the true understanding of the faith and making the claims of the gospel known. Yet Bloesch does allow a place for apologetics (answering the criticisms from the world outside the church) and polemics (correcting misunderstandings of the faith within the church), but not as a preamble to dogmatics (*Word and Spirit* 127).

Theology: A "Faith-responsive Science"

62. In much of Bloesch's discussion, theology sounds like an essentially practical discipline:

Theology endeavors to present a true picture of the activity of divinity that serves to illumine the pilgrimage of faith. Its purpose is not to give abstract knowledge of God but to direct humanity to its spiritual home for the glory of God. (*Word and Spirit* 116)

Bloesch is, however, willing to grant that theology is a science, not in the sense of natural science, but in the sense that it is true and certain (*Word and Spirit* 115). We can have real knowledge of God, though it is partial, broken, and only open to the eyes of faith. "God makes himself an object of our understanding, but this can be perceived only in faith" (*Word and Spirit* 118-9).²⁰

63. For this reason Bloesch calls theology a "faith-responsive science" (*Word and Spirit* 118). Its goal is to hear the Word of God through Scripture as the medium under the illumination of the Holy Spirit and then 1) systematically reflect upon that Word utilizing the resources of the history of Christian thought, 2) explicate the Word for the church, and 3) relate it to the particular age and cultural milieu in which the church finds itself.

64. True theology, in Bloesch's perspective, is self-transcending in that it constantly points beyond itself to Jesus Christ. It also has an eschatological orientation. The doctrine that the church develops in theological inquiry "will not become one with the dogma of revelation until the eschaton--when we will know even as we are known" (*Word and Spirit* 19). The holy catholic faith can never be definitively formulated by human beings.

F. Theological Authority

65. Theological authority, for Bloesch, implies the criterion or norm of faith and practice, the ultimate arbiter of truth and morals (*Word and Spirit* 185). Bloesch contends that "Jesus Christ himself is the ultimate authority for Christian faith" (*Word and Spirit* 185). But the question then becomes where do we find this norm?

66. In order to answer this question, Bloesch makes a distinction between "absolute and relative norms" and identifies several interdependent "loci of authority." While the absolute norm for Christian faith and theology is the Gospel or Jesus Christ himself, or more accurately, as Calvin put it, Jesus Christ clothed with the Gospel, this norm is only found in relative (dependent) norms: the Bible, the church and its tradition, and the experience of faith (*Word and Spirit* 195).

67. The Bible is the record of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection, as well as the sacred history leading up to God's self-revelation in Christ. Therefore the Bible is included in the objective pole of revelation and

authority. While "Jesus Christ is apex and the foundation of faith and authority..." (*Word and Spirit* 191), Bloesch sees the Bible as the "mediate or historical" source of authority and can affirm *sola scriptura* with the Reformers (*Word and Spirit* 187).

68. However, Bloesch astutely observes that:

When the Reformers spoke of *sola Scriptura*, they meant the Bible illuminated by the Spirit in the matrix of the church. *Sola Scriptura* is not *nuda Scriptura* (the bare Scripture). It means that the Bible is our primary authority, but not our only authority. (*Word and Spirit* 193)

The Bible comes to each subsequent generation in history within a community of faith that has already heard Jesus Christ speaking through the Scriptures and also has a tradition of reflection upon what it has heard. In this sense the church has authority "insofar as it submits to the higher authority of the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ, who is its head and goal" (*Word and Spirit* 190).

69. Theological authority has not only an historical dimension (the Bible or biblical history) and an ecclesial dimension (the church and its tradition), it has a "mystical dimension" (*Word and Spirit* 189). Here the Word and Spirit motif again comes into play. The Bible is the objective norm, but "to be vital and fruitful, this norm must take root in our lives, which means we must experience the reality of God presented in Scripture" (*Word and Spirit* 189). This, of course, is the experience of faith, rather than experience per se, even religious experience, as noted above.

70. This ultimately is the "ground of certainty" for Christian faith and theology. The relative norms do not in themselves possess the capacity to reveal Jesus Christ (*finitum non capax infiniti*, the finite cannot bear the infinite), but through the action of the Spirit the finite can be the bearer of the infinite (*Word and Spirit* 197). The Spirit gives inward confirmation of the objective Self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ in Scripture:

The basis of certainty is to be found in the unity of the internal and the external. The ground of certainty is Jesus Christ as perceived by faith.... The basis of authority lies in the promises of Scripture, illumined by the Spirit, not in the Bible simply as a book.... (*Word and Spirit* 202)

Bloesch is adamant that authority is not completely encased within the pages of Scripture, "for this would reduce the truth of the Bible to law and also exclude the role of the Holy Spirit" (*Word and Spirit* 194).

71. Thus while the various loci of authority in Bloesch's theology are intimately related, there is a definite gradation of norms. The Bible is authoritative over the church and religious experience, since it is grounded in the apostolic witness to revelation (*Word and Spirit* 194). But the absolute authority and norm for faith in Bloesch's theology is the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, though this Word comes to us through Scripture by the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the matrix of the church.

72. Bloesch sees theological authority not as arbitrary and heteronomous (imposed on humanity), demanding servile and blind acceptance. It is rather an authority that provides its own compelling evidence. It is "a gift as well as a claim. It claims our alliance but at the same time imparts the capacity and willingness to adhere to this claim and act upon it" (*Word and Spirit* 205). It is liberating rather than constricting, freeing more than regulating (*Word and Spirit* 185). The reason this is so is that the final source, content and norm for theology is God's redemptive Self-revelation and Self-communication in Jesus Christ mediated through Holy Scripture by the Holy Spirit in which a way that we encounter the real Personal presence and power of the living and loving God and are set free for joyous faith, fidelity, and service.

III. Bloesch's Achievement and its Problems

73. Bloesch's achievement in the area of theological method is a significant achievement within the ranks of evangelical theology. The first two volumes of his systematic theology, *A Theology of Word and Spirit* and *Holy Scripture*, represent a fertile alternative to the evangelical rationalism and liberal experiential-expressivism so prevalent today.

74. Bloesch's break with segments of the evangelical world in the area of theological method arises not out of a simple return to Scripture, but out of a catholic and encyclopedic acquaintance with the church's theological reflection through the ages. Few evangelical theologians have gone to the trouble of interacting as widely and deeply with the history of Christian thought as Bloesch has.

75. Of course, Bloesch is no simple repeater of the past. He develops his position in critical dialogue with the history of theology. He establishes his own position on the basis of his historical research. Yet he utilizes the position he develops to discriminate between achievements and distortions in the history of Christian theology. In fact, his interaction with the history of Christian thought is so formative that it probably plays a more important role in his actual theological practice than is evident in his theoretical account of theological method.

76. In a time of theological polarization within the Church Bloesch's irenic spirit is a welcome relief from the factiousness that characterizes too much of theology today. His ecumenical sensibility is a helpful corrective to evangelicalism's sectarian tendencies.

77. In the area of theological method, Bloesch has grasped a key insight and kept it before the evangelical world and the rest of the theological community for the past two decades. This is his emphasis on the dynamic character of revelation as the paradoxical unity of the Word and Spirit which entails rational apprehension and redemptive experience within a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and the Gospel. It is a revelation that is inseparable from salvation. What we are given in revelation is not simply information about God or the Gospel, but the presence and power of God along with a rationally comprehensible message. This approach also represents Bloesch's concern to reclaim Scripture as "an authoritative and credible guide for faith and practice" on the other side of modernity's critical moment (*Holy Scripture* 11).

78. Bloesch has modeled a new and winsome way to be theologically evangelical. He has expanded the theological horizon for a new generation of evangelical pastors and scholars. Innovation, however, is never without critics and often there is at least a grain of truth in the criticism that results.

79. Crucial to Bloesch's position is the distinction he makes between "signs" and "things," a distinction that goes all the way back to St. Augustine's massively influential work, *De Doctrina Christiana*, one of the first developed treatments of hermeneutics in the Latin West.²¹ In Bloesch's case Scripture is the sign and divine revelation is the thing.

80. The difficulty, however, is that when this distinction is transposed into the modern milieu in which critical biblical scholarship uncovered the culturally conditioned character of the biblical witness and the rise of historical consciousness impressed itself upon Western culture, the relation between the sign and the thing (Scripture and divine revelation) becomes problematic and the sign and the thing begin to drift apart. The question becomes how to mediate between the purely creaturely and historical character of the human condition (and by implication the biblical witness) and a Word from God from beyond; yet a Word that must be actualized within the creaturely conditions of space and time if there is to be genuine *human* knowledge of God.

81. Conservative evangelicalism's way of relaxing the tension between the two in the modern milieu is to appeal to a high doctrine of verbal inspiration which guarantees the identity of Scripture and divine revelation. The Bible becomes an errorless revelation that is propositional in character. Bloesch views this position as defensive, regressive, and unable to overcome the problems thrown up by modernity's critical moment.

82. Bloesch's alternative is "a theology of Word and Spirit" in which the Spirit is given the primary role in forging a conjunction between the very human and historical words of the Bible (the sign) and divine revelation never at our disposal (the thing). It is the pivotal theme of Bloesch's theological method around which everything else revolves and it appears at nearly every critical juncture throughout the first two volumes of his systematic theology. The roles of reason, philosophy, other religions and general revelation in Bloesch's theology are delimited by the fact that only the Spirit of God can speak the Word of God anew and make it efficacious within our creaturely conditions. Scripture is the written Word but it only becomes the living Word when it is illumined by the Spirit. Mundane hermeneutical activities are helpful in procuring the historical meaning, but the revelational or spiritual meaning is dependent on the activity of the Spirit.

83. This, of course, is very near to Karl Barth's position which has been attractive because it solves many of the problems associated with the intellectual advance of modernity. It concedes the truly human and historical character of the Bible, but domesticates the historical-critical approach by granting it only a preliminary place in hermeneutics and theological method before "theological" exegesis begins in earnest.

84. Bloesch is well aware of the problems with the Barthian turn in theological method which "can be faulted for fostering a Nestorian approach to the Bible in which the divine word and the human word are only loosely associated and never function in an indissoluble unity" (*Holy Scripture* 31).²² In addition, the neo-orthodox emphasis on truth as encounter seems to overlook the important insight of sociology of knowledge that there is no actualization of human knowledge apart from a language, a tradition, and a form of life.

85. Despite Bloesch's astute criticism of neo-orthodoxy on this point, there are places in Bloesch's own account of theological method where the human word and the divine word begin to drift apart. For example:

We must make a clear-cut distinction between the historical meaning of the text and its revelational or spiritual meaning. (*Holy Scripture* 190)

The Bible participates in the transcendent Word of God--not directly but through the Spirit of God. (*Holy Scripture* 70)

We can speak of a unity or identity of witness and revelation, but...it is not a property of the witness but a matter of divine grace. (*Holy Scripture* 57)²³

But if the unity or identity is only a matter of divine grace and not at least in some way a property of the biblical witness, then how is Scripture any different than any other classic text? Why does the Spirit speak through this book instead of others? Is this not the real nub of dissatisfaction with Bloesch's position by those on the theological right?

86. Of course, this is only one side of Bloesch's position. There is a counter-melody:

I hold to an ontic difference between the Bible and other books, for the Bible has both a divine origin and a divine goal. (*Holy Scripture* 128)

The original reception of revelation is a component part of revelation. The biblical writers and their writings participated in the event of revelation. (*Holy Scripture* 56)²⁴

The word of the prophets and apostles in the Bible corresponds to the Word of God...In the Bible we have an echo or reverberation of what God has declared in his redeeming word and act in Jesus Christ. (*Holy Scripture* 26)²⁵

Revelation focuses on Jesus Christ, but this decisive event was not isolated. It presupposes a revelatory history, which was a preparation for it and in which it was received. This is the "sacred history" that the Bible mirrors. It is possible therefore to speak of cumulative revelation and levels of revelation. (*Holy Scripture* 50)

87. Here it seems that it is not simply the Spirit that brings about a conjunction between the Word of God and the words of the Bible, the thing and the sign. It appears that there already is an echo or reverberation of the Word in the words that the Spirit renews and fulfills, an echo or reverberation rooted in a "revelatory history" culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ where we have an incarnation of the Word of God within the creaturely and historical structures of human existence and received in the Apostolic foundation of the church. Bloesch needs to clarify the nature of the reverberation or participation between the sign and the thing if he is reluctant to say that it resides exclusively in the Spirit speaking and therefore affirms an ontic difference between the Bible and other books.

88. However, Bloesch has not provided his readers with a developed account of all this. In the first two volumes of his systematic theology, Bloesch is generally content to stress the pivotal role of the Holy Spirit in creating a *conjunction* between the Word of God and the words of Bible. Yet, until he develops this other side of his position in more detail and integrates it with his emphasis on the role of the Spirit (a role that we surely dare not overlook), his theological method of Word and Spirit will continue to be seen as a creative restatement of Karl Barth's approach, a restatement that some will view as still uncomfortably close to occasionalism and that Nestorian dilemma in which the sign and the thing are in danger of drifting apart.

Endnotes

¹ The biographical material contained in this article comes from archival material in the Library at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, personal interviews with Donald Bloesch and his mother, Adele Bloesch, and an unpublished autobiography. I am deeply grateful for the meticulous copy editing of this article by my student research assistant, Rev. E. James Verkest.

² See the list of books at the end of this essay.

³ This combining of antinomies is characteristic of Bloesch's way of doing theology and is part of the strength of his position, as Gary Deddo has pointed out in his perceptive article.

⁴ Faith, for Bloesch, signifies "an inward awakening to the infinite mercy of God revealed in Christ that gives rise to a commitment of the whole person to the claims of Christ" (*Word and Spirit* 37). It is essentially trust (*fiducia*) arising out of a transforming encounter with the Object of faith. Reason is here understood in the widest sense as any human cognitive faculty or capacity, including mystical intuition as well as intellectual comprehension.

⁵ Bloesch grants that reason is active in understanding the words of the gospel before faith and commitment occur. Yet this "is not true understanding, only external apprehension. We do not truly understand until our inward eyes are opened by the Spirit of God to discern the depth of meaning contained in the gospel" (*Word and Spirit* 58).

⁶ See, for example, Knitter, or Hick and Knitter. Even the evangelical theologian, Clark Pinnock, calls for truth seeking dialogue with other religions.

⁷ Bloesch calls his position "fideistic revelationalism" which emphasizes the importance of both "the fact of revelation," but also revelation "existentially embraced as the truth of power of salvation" (*Word and Spirit* 21). It is fideism with a objective pole or anchor in a "objective revelation in history."

⁸ Here Bloesch's position is close that of Barth. See Barth, 38-165, "The Light of Life," where Barth discusses the "little lights" and "other words" in creation.

⁹ "Revelation is God's self-communication... [which] entails not only the unveiling of his gracious and at the same time awesome presence but also the imparting of knowledge of his will and purpose for humankind" (*Holy Scripture* 48).

¹⁰ See Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor*. In Bloesch's theology of Word and Spirit "both revelation and salvation have to be understood as objective-subjective..." (*Word and Spirit* 15).

¹¹ The Gospel, according to Bloesch, "is the surprising movement of God into human history recorded in the Bible culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the corresponding movement of God in the personal history of those who believe" which "transcends every human formulation but is nonetheless inseparable from the New Testament kerygma or evangelical proclamation" (*Word and Spirit* 12-13).

¹² Yet in an endnote Bloesch concedes that "strictly and precisely the Bible is the Word of God only in its paradoxical unity with the Spirit" (*Holy Scripture* 315).

¹³ Bloesch's comprehensive definition of inspiration is "the divine election and guidance of the biblical prophets and the ensuring of their writings as a compelling witness to revelation, the opening of the eyes of the people of that time to the truth of these writings, and the providential preservation of these writings as the unique channel of revelation" (*Holy Scripture* 119-120). Bloesch also contends that inspiration is conceptual and verbal (though not in the sense of perfect accuracy or mechanical dictation), and also plenary (all of Scripture is inspired, though not all is of equal value).

¹⁴ Elsewhere Bloesch argues that, "The deeper understanding--the perception of faith--is outside the confines of purely historical exegesis" (*Holy Scripture* 175).

¹⁵ While there is no direct identity between the words of the Bible and the Word of God, there is an "indirect identity"--or better "a *conjunction* between the Word of God and sacred Scripture by the action of the Spirit" (*Holy Scripture* 57-8).

¹⁶ Bloesch maintains that, "The presence of the living Word of God in Holy Scripture is not an ontological necessity but a free decision of the God who acts and speaks" (*Holy Scripture* 26). Also see 42, 129, 201.

¹⁷ Also see *Holy Scripture* 108, 173, 175, 187.

¹⁸ Elsewhere Bloesch says that tradition is a "secondary" source for theology and culture or context is the "medium" or "field" of theology (*Word and Spirit* 116).

¹⁹ However, nearly every other theologian wants to embody the Christ-transforming-culture motif. Niebuhr's typology is extremely helpful, but the terms "Christ" and "transforming" have become rather elastic in our contemporary theological context. Each theologian provides his or her own content, radically altering the material description of the motif.

²⁰ Elsewhere Bloesch observes that "though we cannot claim a comprehensive knowledge of God as he is in himself, we must not suppose that God in himself is other than God as he relates to us in Jesus Christ. To know God in Christ is to know God in himself... though this is always a partial and broken knowledge waiting for completion on the day of redemption" (*Word and Spirit* 116). Thomas Torrance has argued persuasively that this is, in fact, the basis for a truly scientific theology and he has developed his theology accordingly.

²¹ It is instructive to remember that Augustine's position, as developed in *De Doctrina Christiana* not only permitted allegorical exegesis but created a hermeneutical orientation in which it flourished and led to the kind of unbridled allegorization in the Medieval period that caused the Reformers to reemphasize the plain or literal meaning of the text. It is true, however, that Augustine's "rule of faith" and "rule of love" kept his own allegorization within orthodox boundaries.

²² This is undoubtedly why some Barthian-oriented scholars have turned to narrative theology as a way to provide hermeneutical concreteness to theology by focusing on the creaturely form of the biblical witness and its ability to depict a "followable world" of faith by means of literary devices of the biblical text as narrative.

²³ Also see 23, 42, 54, 76, 178.

²⁴ Elsewhere Bloesch says that, "Because the sign participates in the thing signified, the Bible is included in the redemptive act of Christ..." (*Holy Scripture* 27).

²⁵ "I am reluctant to say that infallibility resides exclusively in the Spirit speaking to us as we read the Bible" (*Holy Scripture* 116-7). Also see 66-67, 122.

Monographs by Donald G. Bloesch

The Battle for the Trinity. Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1985.

Centers of Christian Renewal. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964

The Christian Life and Salvation. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967.

The Christian Witness in a Secular Age. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1968.

The Crisis of Piety. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968.

Crumbling Foundations. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984.

Essentials of Evangelical Theology. 2 vols. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978, 1979.

The Evangelical Renaissance. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973

Faith and its Counterfeits. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981.

Freedom for Obedience. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987.

The Future of Evangelical Theology. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983.

God the Almighty. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995.

The Ground of Certainty. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

Holy Scripture. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994.

The Invaded Church. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1975.

Is the Bible Sexist? Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982.

Jesus is Victor!: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

The Reform of the Church. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.

The Struggle of Prayer. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980.

A Theology of Word and Spirit. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992.

Wellsprings of Renewal. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.

Other Works Cited

Augustine. "On Christian Doctrine." Trans. J. F. Shaw. NPNF, first series, vol. 2. 1886; rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, part 3. Trans. G. W. Bromiley. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961.

Deddo, Gary. "Shapers of Modern Evangelical Theology: Donald Bloesch." *Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin* 6 (Jan/Feb 1995) 17-20.

Hick, John and Paul Knitter, ed. *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987.

Knitter, Paul. *No Other Name?* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985.

Pinnock, Clark. *A Wideness in God's Mercy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.

CTRF@apu.edu

iç½1996