CONTEXT AND CONCEPT:
Contextual Theology and the Nature of Theological Discourse

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The last several decades of the twentieth century witnessed the development of a general consensus on the essentially contextual dimension operative in all theological discourse.[1] Even theologians maintaining the existence of trans-contextual moral and theological realities acknowledge an element of contextuality in all theological formulations.[2] Most theologians thus recognize that "contextualization is part of the very nature of theology itself."[3] Robert Jenson goes so far as to argue, "Recent clamor for 'contextual' theology is of course empty, there never having been any other kind."[4] Thus, the contextual nature of theology "has become almost axiomatic for most theologians."[5]

Despite this near universal consensus on the contextual nature of theology—including a general agreement that all theology takes place in the tension between two poles, the biblical message and the cultural situation—glaring differences remain as to precisely how this theological contextuality should be understood—e.g., re-contextualizing eternal truths (David F. Wells),[6] reflecting critically on the praxis embedded in every situation (Gustavo Gutierrez),[7] establishing "mutually critical correlations" between the message and the situation (Paul Tillich),[8] interpreting "the significance of a religion or cultural norm for a group with a different (or developed) cultural heritage" (Grant Osborne),[9] articulating "faith commitments within a given

[1] For useful introductions to the historical development of the contextual theology movement from an evangelical perspective see Harvie M. Conn, "Contextualization: Where Do We Begin?," in *Evangelicals and Liberation* (ed. Carl E. Armerding Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 90-119; Robert T. Coote and John Stott, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture: the Papers of the Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); and Bruce Fleming, *Contextualisation of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1980).

[2] E.g. Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979); David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989); Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); and David Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003).

[3] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 1.

[4] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.ix. Douglas John Hall points out that despite this near universal consensus, many theologies still represent "a form of thought *which does not regard itself as contextual*" (*Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 69; emphasis his).

[5] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confront Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 97.

[6] David F. Wells, "The Nature and Function of Theology," in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (ed. R. K. Johnston. Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 177.

[7] Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (ed. and trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), xxix.

[8] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 3.8-62; cf. David Tracy, "Theological Method," in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks* (eds. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 36.

[9] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 318.

community utilizing the culturally conditioned categories of that community" (Stanley J. Grenz),[10] and "attending to the affective and cognitive operations in the self-transcending subject" (Bernard Longergan).[11]

This myriad of definitions leaves the theologian in an untenable position: acknowledging that contextual theology is critical for developing a "vital, coherent theology"[12] but unable to ascertain precisely what this is or how it should be done. After briefly surveying this definitional chaos, David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen conclude: "There is not yet a commonly accepted definition of the word contextualization, but only a series of proposals, all of them vying for acceptance."[13]

Given both the general consensus on the contextuality of theology and the widespread diversity of views regarding the nature and practice of theology so understood, this paper will seek to (1) provide a taxonomic framework within which contextual theology can be understood and (2) provide some means for determining how to appropriate the strengths and insights of these various proposals for contextual theology within the framework of the commitments maintained by evangelical theologians.

I. ORDERING CONTEXTUALITY: A TAXONOMY FOR CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

All taxonomies are inherently reductionistic but, given the dizzying number of proposals offered for doing contextual theology, some organizational structure must be used to clarify the relationships between them. A number of such taxonomic grids have been suggested, most of which summarize the various approaches under two or three headings.

The bipolar approach is represented by William Hordern's classic distinction between 'transformers' and 'translators' in theology. Translators focus on communicating the essential content of the Christian faith in a manner that is viable and intelligible in the theologian's situation. By contrast, transformers are willing to adjust both the form *and* the content of the Christian faith based on the needs and ideas of the contemporary situation.[14] Others have made similar bipolar characterizations—existential contextualization vs. dogmatic contextualization,[15] creation centered vs. redemption centered theologies,[16] and traditionalists vs. reformists.[17] These two-dimensional approaches rightly acknowledge the prime significance attached to the two poles of theology and thus group the proposals around those poles. But, while this may be conceptually useful, this schema is too simplistic for our purposes in that it unnecessarily excludes the significant number of theologians who attempt to balance the two poles in some way.

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[10] Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 83.

[11] See Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 98.

[12] Petros Von Vassiliadis, "Orthodoxie und kontextuelle Theologie," *Okumenische Rundschau* 42 (Oct 1993): 452.

[13] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 10.

[14] William E. Horden, *New Directions in Theology Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 141-154.

[15] Bruce Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 24.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Roger E. Olson, "The Future of Evangelical Theology," *CT* 9 (Feb. 1998): 40-48.

Three-dimensional understandings of contextual theology thus attempt to leave room for these moderating approaches. Such tripolar taxonomies include: apostolic, prophetic, and syncretistic (David J. Hesselgrave);[18] translation, adaptation, and contextual (Schreiter);[19] conservative, moderate, and progressive (Clark H. Pinnock); [20] and anti-modern, modern, and post-modern (David Tracy).[21]

Following, this tripolar schema, I will suggest that the various contextual proposals can be adequately conceptualized using three models: the translation, praxis, and synthetic models.[22]

The *translation model* focuses on the kerygmatic pole and, thus, on articulating the unchanging truths of the Bible in a culturally intelligible manner for a given cultural context. The key idea of this model is therefore the existence of supracultural biblical truths that can be both distinguished and separated from their cultural form and articulated in an alternate cultural guise.[23]

Moving to the other end of the contextual spectrum, the *praxis model* emphasizes the situational pole. This model argues that contextualization must unite knowledge as content with knowledge as action in order to properly engage the situation.[24] The classic definition of liberation theology given by Gustavo Gutierrez as "a critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God" exemplifies this approach.[25] This combination of reflection and action is critical to understanding *praxis*. Built on the Aristotelian distinction between *poesis* (doing) and *theoria* (reflection), *praxis* is the point at which the two come together in a dynamic synthesis.[26] Praxis theologians therefore value culture as a proper object of theological reflection and the appropriate means through which the community of faith understands its actions.[27]

The third model comprises those approaches which attempt to find some kind of synthetic balance between the two poles. While varying somewhat in approach and emphasis, theologians in this group all agree that not only the *kerygma* but also the cultural history and thought forms of the context are to be considered as "valid sources for theological expression."[28] Thus, according to the *synthetic model*, "no longer do we speak of culture and world events as areas to which theology is adapted and applied; culture and world events become the very sources of the theological enterprise, along with and equal to scripture and tradition. Both poles—human experience and the Christian tradition—are to be read together dialectically."[29]

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[18] Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 144-157.

[19] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985), 6-15.

[20] Clark H. Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

[21] David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 3-14.

[22] While the aforementioned tripolar taxonomies have their uses, they are also all limited in some ways. Some of them present structures that are either explicitly or implicitly based on ideological premises (i.e., Hesselgrave, Pinnock, and Tracy) and thus seem to be more about theological systems than contextual methodologies. Others use terms that unnecessarily bias the taxonomy in particular directions (e.g. Hesselgrave and Rommen's "syncretistic" and Schreiter's "contextual"). Thus, I have proposed a slightly different tripolar taxonomy to avoid these problems.

[23] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 33.

[24] Ibid., 65.

[25] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxix.

[26] Max L. Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 85.

[27] See Bevans, *Models, 49.*

[28] Ibid., 2.

[29] Ibid., 11. In this vein, Stanley J. Grenz criticizes the praxis approach (he calls it "correlationist") for universalizing the cultural pole and the translationist (or "contextualizer") model for assuming a "Christian universal" and as a result overlooking "the particularity of every understanding of the Christian message" ("Culture

II. ORIENTING CONTEXTUALITY: THE LAYERS OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Now that we have established at least an approximate range of proposals regarding contextual theology, we are still left with the difficulty of determining which of them is most appropriate for contextualizing biblical and theological formulations. Considering the diversity of these various models and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each, Stephen Bevans states:

> Each of these models is valid, so none can claim hegemony. Each has a number of distinct advantages, and each has representatives who do the model justice….There was a time when contextual theologians argued over whether one way of doing theology was the only way, but this kind of discussion has been recognized as futile….There needs to be a healthy pluralism.[30]

While this may be a valid insight, indeed this paper will argue that a variety of models should be adopted, we must inquire as to how we should choose which model to follow at any given time. Bevans suggests that the choice should be made strictly on the basis of which model would work best in a particular situation:

> …certain models can function more adequately within certain sets of circumstances. It seems to be that the praxis model might be better employed in a situation that calls for radical social change than the translation model, which might tend to be content with the status quo….In a situation of primary evangelization, translating one's own understanding of the gospel into the language and customs of another culture may be the only option open until indigenous Christians are able to reflectively construct their own local theology.[31]

While agreeing with Bevans' basic insight that multiple models of contextual theology must be used to effectively address the complexity of the modern situation, it might be questioned whether or not such a pragmatic method of selection is always appropriate. Given the weaknesses that many have pointed to in the various approaches, one could rightly ask whether there is *any* context in which it is theologically appropriate to use one particular model as *the* exclusive mode of theologizing.[32]

Therefore, rather than focusing solely on the cultural context within which a theologian operates as the determining factor, I will suggest that each of the different approaches to contextual theology must be used in every situation and that the criteria used to determine when

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and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *AsTJ* 55.2 [2000]: 44). Instead he suggests that the two approaches must be "held in tandem" employing an "interactive process that is both correlative and contextual" (Ibid.).

[30] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 111.

[31] Ibid., 112.

[32] For extended evaluations of the different approaches to contextual theology and the weaknesses associated with each one see Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*; Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*; and Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*.

a given contextual methodology should be used are derived from the nature of the biblical and theological discourse.

1. *The Structure of Conceptual Discourse: Paradigm, Model, and Theory*

In the wake of the Kantian revolution, most everyone accepts the perspectival nature of human knowledge. In other words, everything that we experience is filtered through a grid that comprises all our various theories and ideas about the world. Thus our experiences are perceived in a certain way depending on our perceptual framework. This does not mean that we cannot know things adequately but only that a completely objective 'God's-eye' view of the world will never be available to us. Charles Kraft suggests that this perspectival framework includes several different "levels of conceptual complexity."[33] Following this insight, we will argue that there are three such levels to all conceptual discourse which together formulate a person's way of viewing the world: paradigms, models, and theories.

a. Paradigm

The ubiquitous use of the term "paradigm" to describe conceptual structures can be traced to the seminal work of Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In it he defined paradigms as "standard examples of scientific work which embody a set of conceptual, methodological and metaphysical assumptions."[34] According to Kuhn, scientific viewpoints are so controlled by these conceptual structures that a scientist's observations, organizations, and theories are "paradigm-dependent."[35] Scientists operating from different paradigms thus will not be able to assess the same data in the same way. On this view, the various paradigms are 'incommensurable.'[36] Any move from one paradigm to another must therefore be viewed as a "revolution" or as some form of conversion.[37] This notion of communities of people with shared paradigmatic conceptual frameworks that structure the way those communities view reality has garnered near universal support in the academic world although there remain significant differences regarding what a paradigm is and how it functions in relation to other paradigms.

Paradigms thus dominate every aspect of life and play a role in the interpretation of all forms of experience.[38] According to Ian Barbour, "There is, in short, *no uninterpreted*

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[33] Bevans, *Models*, 31.

[34] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 187. Most writers agree that he did not have one standard definition of paradigms and actually used the word quite ambiguously at times (See Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* [New York: Harper & Row, 1974], 93-94).

[35] Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 187-191.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Although Kuhn later softened his stance on incommensurability, he continued to maintain the paradigmatic framework for scientific reasoning (Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 108-112).

[38] The term 'paradigm' is often used in the sense of a conceptual structure through which *all of reality* is perceived. In this way, a 'paradigm' is virtually synonymous with a 'worldview.' Reserving this broader sense for 'worldview', we will use a more Kuhnian understanding of 'paradigm' as a conceptual structure through which *some particular portion* of reality is perceived. A paradigm thus serves to order sensory experiences according to some pre-determined interpretive pattern. "People sort information that is new to them according to the categories provided by their perspectives. This is thinking in terms of the perspective" (David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003], 134). Paradigmatic differences will therefore cause people to integrate new information into their conceptual frameworks differently.

experience of the sort which the positivist posits. We don't simply see; we 'see as'. In the act of perception, the irreducible 'data' are not isolated patches of colour or fragmentary sensations, but total patterns in which interpretation has already entered."[39] These paradigms are derived from (among other things) culture, language, and the consistent reliability with which a framework interprets the data.

Since a paradigm only serves as the interpretive grid for a particular set of experiences, it stands to reason that people operate with many different paradigms. No single paradigm is sufficient to interpret all experiences but rather a person uses a variety of paradigms, integrated more or less coherently into a worldview that provides an adequate grid for such interpretation. Some would even argue that a worldview is not sufficient to capture the complexity of reality since "no single theory can claim to give the whole picture."[40] They assert that we must therefore allow for many different worldviews (e.g., theism, pantheism, naturalism, etc.) to co-exist as each tries to capture some aspect of reality. But this stems from a misunderstanding of what a worldview is. A worldview does not attempt to "give the whole picture," a truly Herculean task possible only from a divine perspective, but instead to give an explanation of the picture as it has been experienced and interpreted from a particular, limited perspective. My worldview contains paradigms for driving a car, writing a research paper, and understanding religious experiences but does not include any paradigms for other experiences that are not a part of my reality.[41] It is thus not a complete picture of the world-in-itself but a complete picture of the world-as-I-see-it.

Based on the previous statement, one might conclude that paradigms are truly incommensurable; criteria of assessment are "paradigm-dependent' and there are thus no trans-contextual criteria for discussing paradigms and worldviews. This would appear to be true only if two worldviews did not hold any paradigms in common. This seems extraordinarily unlikely. Experiences with completely unrelated cultures suggest that while no two cultures are precisely the same with respect to their paradigmatic structures, there is significant overlap. Two worldviews can therefore carry on significant dialogue using the areas of commonality to address and assess paradigms not held in common.[42]

b. Model

A second level of conceptual discourse is provided by *models*, which bear a similar relationship to paradigms that paradigms bear to worldviews. A worldview is thus understood as a view of reality comprising many different paradigms used for interpreting particular sets of experience which are in turn fleshed out through a variety of models. So a paradigm is a conceptual structure used for interpreting some portion of reality that is itself explicated and clarified through the use of various models.[43]

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[39] Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 120.

[40] John Reader, *Local Theology: Church and Community in Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 1994), 131.

[41] Giving examples of this latter category is virtually impossible since to give an example indicates some awareness of the experience and thus at least a partially formed paradigm for understanding it.

[42] Alasdair MacIntyre similarly argues that interpretive communities operate with different paradigms and thus different criteria of rationality but that they are not necessarily incommensurable (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). See also Terry Godlove, "In What Sense are Religions Conceptual Frameworks?," *JAAR* 52.2 (June 1984): 289-305.

[43] This is, of course, somewhat reductionistic since there are many instances of broader paradigms (e.g., Newtonian physics) that comprise a variety of sub-paradigms (e.g., the laws of thermodynamics) that can both be explained by a variety of more or less adequate models.

While there are a number of different kinds of models (e.g., scale models, mathematical models, etc.), most pertinent for the matter at hand are those commonly described as theoretical models. Barbour defines a theoretical model as "an imagined mechanism or process, postulated by *analogy* with familiar processes and used to construct a *theory* to correlate a set of *observations*."[44] In somewhat less technical terms, Avery Dulles defines a model as "a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated."[45] While paradigms engage reality at a rather complex level, models are attempts to explicate this reality in a more readily understandable manner. As an example, physicists often use the "billiard-ball" model of gas molecules. In this example, the more complex paradigm provided by physics is clarified through the use of the easily understood analogy of gas molecules as billiard balls bouncing around in a box.[46]

Ian Barbour describes models as characterized by three things; they are "analogical, extensible, and unitary."[47] They are *analogical* in that models tend to be chosen from things with which we are familiar and used to explain things with which we are less familiar.[48] They are *extensible* in that they "encourage the postulation of new rules of correspondence and the application of a theory to new kinds of phenomena."[49] Thus models are not merely heuristic devices but also contribute to the extension of knowledge and the development of new ideas. They are also *unitary* in the sense that the model is meant to "grasped as a whole"—i.e., it presents a variety of complex relationships in one integrated whole.[50] Referring back to the billiard-ball model, Barbour notes that the use of this model in physics has not only drawn an analogy between the gas molecules and the billiard balls that presents a complex set of information in an integrated whole but has also helped extend theories in other areas of physics (e.g., kinetic theory).[51]

An important question arises when we stop to consider the truth-value of models. Echoing earlier discussions on functionalism in language, some philosophers argue that models are only "useful fictions" that serve to clarify some set of experiential data but make no actual truth claims about reality. Two problems arise with respect to this argument. First, the idea of a model as a "useful fiction" presumes that its users know it to be false and yet continue to use it because of its practical value. But this does not describe the way that people actually use most theoretic models. Most of these models have gained currency not for the mere pragmatic reason that they work but because their users believe that they do in fact say something at least adequately true about reality. This natural intuition should not be dismissed out of hand. Second, many "useful fictions" fail to be useful once we realize that they are fictions. This is especially true with respect to ethical and religious models. It is not enough to say that the "humble servant" model in ethics or the "God as Father" model in theology are useful ways to structure experience because once they are believed to be false they can no longer function effectively as models. Contrary to this perspective, we must argue that most models (we should allow that

[44] Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms,* 30.

[45] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1978), 28.

[46] See Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms,* 30-32.

[47] Ibid., 49.

[48] See also Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 69.

[49] Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms,* 33.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid. In a similar manner, Steven Bevans argues that "models can and do disclose actual features in the matter under investigation; they are disclosive of reality" (*Models of Contextual Theology,* 25).

some models may in fact be merely "useful fictions") do in fact refer adequately, though not comprehensively, to extra-linguistic realities. "Models," according to Bevans, "provide a knowledge that is always partial and inadequate, but never false or merely subjective."[52]

Max Born contends that it is the referential capacity of models that makes their disclosive and extensible aspects possible.[53] Indeed, apart from the referentiality of models, we are hard pressed to explain their amazing capacity for describing, interpreting, and even predicting reality. Thus, Frederick Ferré asserts that one of the primary values of theoretical models is that they have the effect of "suggesting potentially fruitful *lines of inquiry* and the making of new discoveries."[54]

The adequate referentiality of good theoretical models, though, should not blind us to the fact that they refer adequately rather than comprehensively. Like paradigms, then, we must make use of a variety of models to portray the complex reality before us.

c. Theory

Our third level of conceptual discourse is that of the theory. For our purposes, a theory may be defined as any concept that seeks to elucidate more or less precisely the content of some model.[55] Although there is a sense in which theories may also be applied directly to paradigms in an effort to more precisely articulate the conceptual content of the paradigm, they are more closely related to models. Donald Bloesch views a concept (his term for a theory) as "an attempt to elucidate the meaning already in symbols" and thus as one step further removed from the reality described by the model and the paradigm.[56] Bloesch further contends that a concept has a univocal correspondence to reality while a symbol only "brokenly reflects what it is intended to signify."[57] While I would not agree that even a theory manages to attain a univocal correspondence with reality, it does seem to be the case that models tend to be "intuitively grasped" and seek the more precise meaning that can be rendered through theoretical discourse.

The relationship between model and theory is thus very similar to one popular understanding of the relationship between metaphor and concept. Although the meaning of any given metaphor is inextricably linked with its metaphorical form and thus cannot be adequately replaced by an ostensibly non-metaphorical mode of discourse,[58] metaphorical discourse nevertheless has a cognitive dimension that can be addressed, at least partially, with conceptual language.[59] This relationship, though, should not be understood in terms of a static 'interpretation' but a more dynamic 'transfiguration' as the metaphors "are inevitably taken up into further language and experience, there to be reinterpreted in conceptual modes that can

[52] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 25.

[53] See Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 47.

[54] Frederick Ferré, "The Linguistic Key," in *The Challenge of Religion: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy of Religion* (eds. Frederick Ferré, Joseph J. Kockelmans, and John E. Smith; New York: Seabury, 1982), 188.

[55] Cf. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 315.

[56] Donald Bloesch, *Theology of Word and Spirit* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992), 71-72.

[57] Ibid., 71.

[58] Frank Burch Brown notes that the irreducibility of metaphorical discourse is accepted by most thinkers dealing with metaphorical discourse (*Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* [Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983], 4).

[59] See Brown, *Transfiguration* and William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

themselves generate further poetic and imaginative exploration."[60] Similarly, our intuitive grasp of a model gives rise to theoretic statements further describing the reality the model seeks to represent. Although something is necessarily lost in the translation from model to theory, the attempt to understand the model conceptually leads, hopefully, to a re-engagement with the model and a corresponding deepening of both model and theory.

2. The Structure of Biblical Discourse: Assertion, Inference, and Speculation

Not only can we draw an important distinction between the various levels of conceptual discourse but we can also make a similarly useful set of distinctions with respect to biblical discourse. We may thus speak of three different levels of biblical discourse: assertion, inference, and speculation. Each of these can and should be formulated as *articulations*, which will be understood to refer to the way in which any of these three elements of theological reflection are developed and stated in a given cultural context.[61]

a. Assertion

The first level of biblical discourse is that of *assertion*—i.e., the statements of the biblical text itself. The category of *assertion*, therefore, comprises all the particular statements of the Bible and, thus, includes not only its various propositions but also its narrative and symbolic elements.[62]

b. Inference

There is a second level of biblical discourse, however, that must be considered. Though evangelical theology must be biblical, it must not be reduced to biblicism. Limiting theology to those things that are explicitly stated by the biblical texts would unnecessarily limit our ability to adequately engage the reality around us. Such a move would also be based on a mistaken understanding of communication. Most of what we communicate is done not through *assertion* but through *inference*—i.e., ideas that can be reasonably deduced from our assertions. Therefore, the Bible, as a communicative act, must likewise be engaged at the level of *inference*. A biblical *inference* will thus cover those ideas which may be reasonably drawn from the affirmations of the biblical text.

As an example, all orthodox Christians would agree that the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are asserted in the Scriptures. But the classic doctrine of the Trinity, three persons existing eternally in one nature, is not. While orthodox Christians would be quick to

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[60] Brown, *Transfiguration*, 7. Paul Ricoeur has developed this understanding of the relationship between metaphor and concept extensively (see especially *Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [trans. Robert Czerny; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977].

[61] Although the biblical text would itself be an articulation in this view, this paper focuses on the contextualization of theological formulations derived from biblical discourse rather than the contextualization contained in such discourse.

[62] This, of course, does not bring into view the hermeneutical difficulties involved in interpreting the biblical statements. Any complete contextual methodology will need to address adequately the questions raised by contextual theology for our hermeneutical methodology. Thus, this model does not deny that there are contextual influences at the level of understanding the biblical assertions, it simply argues that our understanding of those assertions should function at a different level in our theological discourse than those that are more properly described as inferences or speculations.

defend this classic understanding of the Trinity as a legitimate inference from the biblical data, we must be equally quick to acknowledge that it is not an explicit biblical *assertion* but an *inference* we think is justified.[63]

c. Speculation

Biblical discourse, though, is not limited, and I would suggest should not be limited, to only the first two levels. We must also acknowledge a role for *speculation*—i.e. drawing theological conclusions from the biblical texts that are neither asserted nor inferred but may nonetheless be justified in some way. A speculation is thus not an explicit assertion nor a reasonable inference but a thoughtful deduction from or extension of those assertions and inferences. Particular speculations should thus be understood as contextually defensible theological formulations.

Continuing to use the doctrine of the Trinity as an example, the eternal generation of the Son and the dual procession of the Spirit are, in my opinion, examples of such speculation. Neither of the two doctrines are asserted in Scripture nor do they appear to be necessary (some would say not even justified) inferences from that data. We will argue in the next section, though, that this does not mean that they are illegitimate or invalid theological conclusions; they are simply functioning at a different level of discourse than the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity.

Having postulated the existence of these three different levels of biblical discourse, a difficult question arises as to the feasibility of discriminating between them. Given a particular theological formulation, what are the criteria by which we can determine whether it is an attempt to articulate a biblical assertion, inference, or speculation? This is, I suggest, one of the more challenging tasks of modern theology and one that cannot be briefly addressed. Theologians of all stripes must begin to think more critically as to the particular level of biblical discourse on which their various theological formulations operate in order to understand more adequately their relationship to an individual's overall theological structure and to other theological perspectives.

3. The Structure of Discourse and the Models of Contextual Theology

We have now seen that both conceptual and biblical discourse can be organized in two hierarchically arranged systems. We have also proposed three primary models for doing contextual theology. While this three-fold structure of three-fold relations is certainly contrived to a degree, some relationships can be drawn between these three frameworks that may help clarify how a model of contextual theology can be developed that utilizes the strengths of all three contextual models. We will therefore consider those various relationships and argue that by using the three models of contextual theology based on an appropriate understanding of their corresponding level of conceptual and/or biblical discourse, we will be able to develop a new model for contextual theology.

[63] Of course, a very difficult methodological question that has not been addressed here is the means by which we determine when a particular inference is in fact justified. As this enters into questions of hermeneutical methodology that lie outside the scope of this paper, we will simply have to note that this vital question is one that warrants further consideration.

a. Paradigm, Assertion, and Translation

Since paradigms are the means by which a worldview is actuated in an individual's life or cultural situation, there is no way to maintain a given worldview without maintaining the corresponding paradigms.[64] In order to uphold our commitment to a biblical worldview, we must therefore have a correspondingly high level of commitment to the biblical paradigms that structure and actuate that worldview (e.g., personal theism, Christocentric soteriology, etc.). Thus, Allister McGrath writes that doctrine "provides the conceptual framework by which the scriptural narrative is interpreted" and immediately notes that this "is not an arbitrary framework…but one which is suggested by that narrative, and intimated (however provisionally) by scripture itself."[65] Christian community and theology is only identifiable and sustainable as distinctly *Christian* insofar as it continues to maintain its dedication to the "paradigmatic biblical narrative."[66]

Having said this, it quickly becomes clear that the contextual methodology most appropriate to this level of theological articulation is that of the translation model. By using this model we are attempting to understand the biblical paradigms as they were and are given in the text and to communicate those paradigms in a new cultural situation with sensitivity to both text and context but with an emphasis on accurately communicating the original sense of the paradigm.

While the realities of translation preclude the possibility that we can express *exactly* the same content in two different thought-forms, we can still strive to *adequately* express the same idea in a variety of situations.[67] As D. A. Carson points out, one cannot simply translate "Jesus is Lord" into an African context as "Jesus is Chief" and expect to have said the same thing but, given sufficient

Insert Figure 1 Here

[64] In a somewhat similar manner, Harvie Conn notes the difference between "pre-theoretical" worldviews and the paradigms that flow out of them (*Eternal Words and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Missiology in Trialogue* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 49). Conn, though, argues that since these paradigms lie closer to the "surface-level of reality" than their worldviews, evangelicals should be careful about using "battle language" in their defense and should instead reserve such discourse for defending the more bedrock worldviews. But this approach misses the essential connection between a worldview and its corresponding paradigms. Without the paradigmatic framework there is little left to provide any real content to the worldview and thus it does not seem possible to abandon the paradigmatic framework of a given worldview while still maintaining that worldview in any recognizable form. It may be that some of the concerns that he raises with respect to becoming too committed to our paradigms is a result of unclear thinking by theologians as to the difference between paradigm and theory in our theological systems.

[65] Allister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 113.

[66] Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (ed. John G. Stackhouse; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 126. Affirming the paradigmatic nature of the biblical texts should not be understood as an attempt to abstract the "essential meaning" of the texts as though there were a pure conceptual "kernel" that could be separated from its merely textual "husk." Harvie Conn rightly points out that this platonic approach to theology characterized early missiological endeavors and both derives from and leads to rationalistic and ultimately imperialistic approaches to theology (see "Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas," in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church* [ed. William R. Barr; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 99-100; see also *Eternal Words and Changing Worlds*, 192-224).

[67] Cf. Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper & Row; repr. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1972), 89-90.

time and understanding of the culture, one can reasonably hope to translate the same basic paradigm in the new situation.[68]

While biblical assertions encompass too broad a range of communicative acts to be naively associated with just one level of discourse, it seems that they should be associated *primarily* with paradigms and the translation model. There are certainly a number of different things that biblical assertions can do—e.g., promise, command, etc.—but it seems that the primary function of these assertions is to develop paradigmatic ways of viewing the world. The Bible makes no attempt to provide comprehensive instructions for Christian living or a complete theological textbook for comprehensively understanding the nature of God and salvation. Instead, the biblical text should be viewed primarily in terms of the worldview that it develops and its corresponding paradigms.

This, of course, does not deny that many biblical assertions do in fact function at the level of models and theories and must be treated as such (see figure 1). I am simply arguing that the broader function of the biblical texts is to foster a biblical worldview through the development of biblical paradigms. These paradigms are thus pivotal to maintaining and understanding the biblical worldview and must therefore be contextualized using the *translation* model.

b. Model, Inference, and Synthesis

As we move from discourse involving paradigms and assertions into the next level of discourse, the situation changes somewhat. As indicated previously, models are primarily conceptual constructs used to explicate, clarify, and extend the ideas and implications of a given paradigm. Since models are largely analogical constructs drawing on the resources of the familiar to explicate the content of the less familiar, adequate models need to rely extensively on the conceptual resources of the cultural situation in order to explain clearly the conceptual content of the paradigms in question. Theological models are thus caught up in the tension between the biblical paradigms they seek to clarify and the cultural contexts in which they must operate. The most appropriate model of contextual theology for this level of discourse is, thus, that of the synthetic model. Seeking to grasp both horns of the dilemma in equal measure, the synthetic model is best suited to a level of discourse that so clearly relies on both to accomplish its purposes.

Once again, though, as we consider the relationship of this level of discourse to biblical language, we must acknowledge that although the connecting lines are not always clear, some general observations may be made. Given what has just been said about how theological models function, it should be clear that we do not need to restrict ourselves solely to those models that are specifically asserted in Scripture. We must develop whatever models are necessary for communicating the various biblical paradigms in our contemporary contexts. But these models cannot be divorced from the biblical paradigms they are to explicate and must therefore remain intimately connected to the biblical text.

Insert Figure 2 Here

The fact that we must, therefore, distinguish between our models and the biblical data means that we must be aware that our models may well be culturally influenced and subject to revision as cultures change or outright rejection by other cultures. As Charles Kraft states:

> The position taken here is that valid theologizing may be done on the basis of a variety of cultural, subcultural, and disciplinary models. Not everything said or

[68] Carson, *The Gagging of God,* 99-100.

> done in the theological realm is valid, since not everything is allowed by the data. But different understandings of reality generate different questions with respect to biblically revealed data, just as they do with respect to the natural world. And the answers obtained, when systematized, result in different 'indigenous' theologies.[69]

Even within a given culture we must be willing to allow the possibility, even the likelihood, that multiple models will be needed to explicate the biblical paradigms. This is true for at least two reasons. First, we must recognize that people respond differently to different models and that a multiplicity of models better enables these different people to interact with the paradigms at hand.[70] Second, the fact that we are attempting to speak of divine realities using human communicative and conceptual tools should indicate that our models are necessarily limited with respect to those divine realities and, thus, any given model will only address a particular aspect of that reality. The nature of theology is such that "we may need more than one interpretive framework to articulate fully its meaning and significance."[71]

Two further questions must be addressed before we can leave this section. First, what about those models that are specifically asserted by the text (e.g., the ransom, redemption, and other models of the atonement paradigm)? Should they be handled with the translation or the synthetic model of theology? While we should certainly feel free to develop other models (provided they are legitimately inferred from the textual paradigms), we neglect such well-established, proven, and divinely inspired models at our own peril. Though it *may* be theoretically possible to adequately communicate the biblical paradigms without using any of the biblical models asserted in the text, it is neither necessary nor wise to do so. Biblical models should thus remain an essential part of our theological discourse.

Second, can theological speculations play any role in the development of theological models? We will treat theological speculations more in the next section but it seems appropriate to address this question here. Since the purpose of a theological model is to explicate, clarify, and extend the conceptual content and implications of a paradigm, it would seem misleading and potentially dangerous to rely on models developed from speculation. Such speculative models would then occasion speculative theories that are even more removed from the paradigmatic structure of the text. The role of speculative models in theology should therefore be very circumscribed.

c. Theory, Speculation, and Praxis

Finally, we move to the third level of discourse. At this point we are no longer dealing with biblical assertions or the ideas reasonably inferred from them but the more speculative aspects of theological formulation.

At this point, two objections might reasonably be raised. First, some might wonder whether it is legitimate to place speculation on the same level as theory and praxis in this way since speculation is often viewed as being almost the antithesis of the practical engagement with life emphasized by the praxis model. Given how speculation has

Insert Figure 3 Here

[69] Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 33-34.

[70] Cf. Ramsey¸ *Religious Language*, 90-91.

[71] Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor: A Dramatic Proposal about the Ministry and Minstrelsy of Theology," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 78.

tended to be done in the history of the theology and its too-often close association with metaphysical speculation, this objection carries significant weight. But, speculation more properly understood is not about 'ontological flights of fancy' but rather about ways of making a particular theological model *vital* and *coherent* in a given context. This connection between praxis and speculation can be seen even more clearly when we move from metaphysical to ethical modes of discourse. If we consider how ethical paradigms (e.g., 'love your neighbor') are explicated by ethical models (e.g., the servant model) which are in turn made more *vital* and *coherent* by speculative theories on how that model is to be fleshed out in a particular context (e.g., 'I should help my elderly neighbor, Bob, by mowing his lawn'), we can see how speculation and praxis are intimately connected. Speculation, rightly used, enables us to live (both through ideas and actions) our paradigms and models in our individual circumstances.

A better understanding of speculation should also be useful in addressing a second objection with respect to whether or not the move to a third level of discourse is legitimate. Some question whether speculative theology presses too far into the divine mysteries to serve any useful purpose. Three responses might be made to this. First, this question again confuses all forms of speculation with metaphysical speculation and neglects other legitimate modes of discourse (e.g., ethical speculation).

Second, sometimes the theological issues raised by controversy and heresy demand a corresponding clarity in articulating the orthodox theological position, even when it involves some element of metaphysical speculation. Hilary of Poitiers defended the precise theological statements of his day in this way:

> But the errors of heretics and blasphemers force us to deal with unlawful matters, to scale perilous heights, to speak unutterable words, to trespass on forbidden ground. Faith ought in silence to fulfill the commandments, worshiping the Father, reverencing with him the Son, abounding in the Holy Ghost. But we must strain the poor resources of our language to express thoughts too great for words. The error of others compels us to err in daring to embody in human terms truths which ought to be hidden in the silent veneration of the heart. (*On the Trinity*, 2.2)

Though recognizing that human words cannot attain to the full reality of the divine, he nonetheless argued that to protect the integrity of theology we must "strain the poor resources of language" and speak as clearly as we can.

A third response is to recognize what we are often doing with language at this level of discourse. The primary purpose of a theory should not be viewed as speaking of reality *as it really is* but as constructing ways of speaking about that reality that are coherent, consistent, and viable with respect to our paradigms and models. Thus, rather than asking whether or not the Son *actually* proceeds eternally from the Father, the question becomes whether or not that way of speaking provides the best way of understanding the theistic paradigm and Trinitarian models at work there. It is at this level (and possibly at the level of models as well) that we can affirm George Lindbeck's distinction between first- and second-order theology. In his terms, a *theory* is an "intrasystematic" statement rather than an "ontological" claim about reality.[72] This being the case, we cannot be accused of 'drilling down' into the divine mysteries since what we

[72] See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 64.

are actually doing is trying to speak coherently given the particular paradigmatic structure of our theology.

The fact that we have moved from 'ontological' to 'intrasystematic' statements suggests a corresponding move from models of contextual theology emphasizing the message to one that emphasizes primarily the context: the *praxis model*. The question to be addressed with this model is whether or not a particular theological formulation leads to reflective action. The theory must work in two different directions. It must work coherently within the theological system (does it make sense?) and it must also work viably within the cultural system (does it provide meaningful ways of living?). Although we must be aware of the socio-political ramifications of all our theological formulations, it is at the level of the theory that these issues become prominent as we seek to make sure that the ways in which we are explaining our paradigmatic structures are doing justice to the context in which we find ourselves.

III. CONCLUSION

The contemporary theologian is faced with a difficult problem—knowing that theology is necessarily contextual but facing a bewildering number of proposals on the nature of that contextuality and the manner in which contextual theology is properly done. I have argued that these various proposals all have value provided that they are used primarily with respect to the level of biblical discourse for which they are most appropriate. By approaching the task of contextual theology in this way we can seek to retain our commitment to the paradigmatic biblical discourse while at the same time allowing room for the imaginative creativity and theological flexibility necessary for engaging a world in constant flux. While I am not suggesting that this approach to contextual theology resolves all of the problems encountered by anyone attempting to take seriously the contextuality of theological formulations, I do think that it provides a useful means for moving forward and for appropriating the strengths of various contextual models while seeking to avoid their weaknesses.

List of Tables

The 1st Layer of Theological Discourse

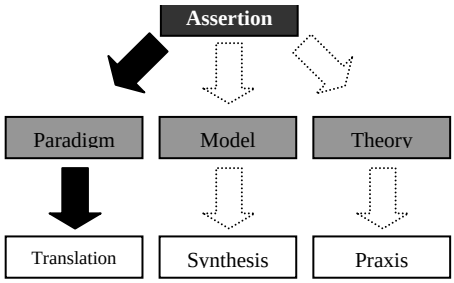

Figure 1

The 2nd Layer of Theological Discourse

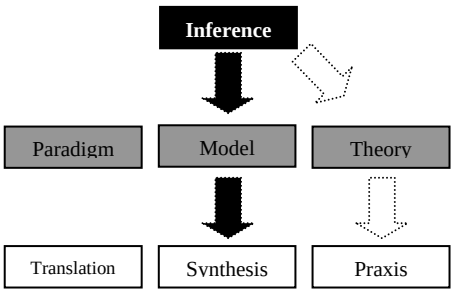

Figure 2

The 3rd Layer of Theological Discourse

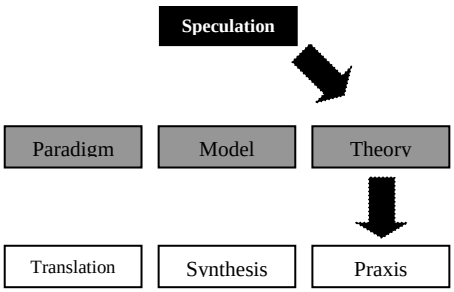

Figure 3