

Response

The virtue of ambiguity: a response to Archie Spencer

In his essay ‘Culture, Community and Commitments’, Archie Spencer expresses interest in, and appreciation for, my proposal for evangelical theology, because he finds in me what he characterizes as ‘a moderating voice between the extremes’ in the contemporary discussion. I am deeply gratified that a younger theologian of his potential would look to me as a pioneer and would honor me by taking such keen interest in my work.

Spencer’s essay is structured in accordance with three issues that he helpfully elevates as standing out in my theology: the relationship between theology and culture, the manner in which a communal theology can be grounded in the contemporary cultural context, and the kinds of commitments that a culturally engaged, communally grounded theology should make. Spencer does not deal with these questions directly, however, choosing rather to focus on a narrower instantiation of each of these broad topics. The burden of his essay is to call for clarity on my part in the face of what he sees as the ambiguity in my engagement with these questions. In the space allotted to me, I will take up Spencer’s challenge, albeit not by providing additional clarification to what I have already written elsewhere, but by averring that I have in fact been far less ambiguous in my writings than he claims. My contention is that Spencer’s essay, and hence his call for clarification, arises out of a less-than-adequate understanding of what I am attempting to accomplish, and, as a consequence, does not reflect – or reflect upon – the breadth of the approach to theology that I am proposing.

Already in the essay’s introduction, Spencer gives evidence that this is the case. He (erroneously) characterizes my theological agenda as that of proposing ‘new boundaries’ for evangelical theology and states that I am advocating that ‘Christian theology . . . revise its doctrines to reflect . . . postmodern concerns’. His misunderstanding of the goal of my work leads Spencer to find ambiguity in my theological method and as a consequence to voice objections that in my estimation are somewhat wide of the mark. I will attempt to clarify the intent of my theological proposal by engaging with the three points into which Spencer’s essay is divided.

The first issue – that of the relationship between theology and culture – comprises the central, crucial topic of the essay. Rather than pursuing this overarching question itself, however, Spencer calls for a clarification as to how I see Christian theology engaging with the postmodern context, a call

that is motivated by his perception that my approach to this topic is filled with ambiguity.

It would be tempting to follow Spencer's lead and enter into a debate as to what (and who) is and is not postmodern. Rather than allowing the discussion to get sidetracked by the seemingly never-ending debate as to whether something is happening in contemporary society and, if so, how deep the changes run, as well as the proper name by which they should be labeled, let me simply say that I find it odd that Spencer dismisses my extensive work on this topic as comprising no more than a 'seemingly one-sided interpretation of what postmodern culture is', one that fails to see that '[p]ostmodernism is exceedingly complex', but then in the same breath chastises me for drawing into my response to the postmodern challenge a wide variety of contemporary thinkers who are seeking alternatives to Enlightenment rationalism, including post-liberals and Reformed epistemologists. Is it possible that in confining his understanding of the postmodern turn to those (paltry) voices that advocate a wholesale rejection of modernity, Spencer show himself to be the one who is overlooking the complexity of the phenomenon?

Lying behind Spencer's somewhat misguided query regarding the boundaries of postmodernism is a deeper issue that he casts in terms of the relationship of theology to culture. I would reformulate it as the question of the role of culture in our theological method. Regarding this matter, I wonder if my proposal is truly as ambiguous as he suggests. He concludes that I come 'very close to sounding like a "postmodern foundationalist" for whom the first task of theology is to identify the cultural questions that must be addressed'. Not only have I specifically distanced myself from the Tillich-style method of correlation that has become so prevalent in evangelical circles, but I have repeatedly proposed in its place a theological method that centers on an ongoing conversation involving scripture, the theological heritage of the church and the contemporary context (the culture) in which the church is called to proclaim and live the gospel. Indeed this conversation – this 'trialogue' – forms the crux of the methodological proposal that I have outlined in several of my writings over the last ten years. Moreover, I have clearly pointed out that this conversational theological method drives both my interest in the postmodern phenomenon and the nature of my appropriation of those aspects of the postmodern turn that I find helpful to the theological enterprise.

As I have developed at length elsewhere, but especially in *Beyond Foundationalism*, I find an interesting connection between the conversational theological method that I am proposing and the theories offered by

postmodern cultural anthropologists as to how communities function. But I have also been careful to indicate that my affinities for this methodological proposal arise primarily and directly out of my understanding of how Christian theologians have engaged in their craft throughout the history of the church and only secondarily in the affinity that it offers Christians working in the postmodern context.

Spencer rightly points out the danger of cultural accommodationism that threatens any theological method that takes culture seriously (a danger against which I too have given ample warning). Consequently, I can appreciate his distinction between a theology that is responsible to culture and one that is responsible in culture (even though I would not set up as rigid a dichotomy between the two as he seems to suggest). I would hope that a sustained study of my writings would be sufficient to quell the fears that he voices in his essay that I have fallen into the former rather than standing with those who are seeking to offer the latter. To set the record straight, viewed from this perspective I might describe the task of theology as that of taking seriously the yearnings and longings of people that become visible in the cultural expressions of the day and seeking to raise them to their ultimate goal, which can only be known through the self-disclosure of God in Christ and by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit.

The fear regarding my theological method that underlies the entire essay comes to explicit expression in the second section of the essay. Here Spencer voices the concern that in my explication of the doctrine of the trinity I run 'the risk of reducing God to a predicate of human social experience'.

Once again, it would be tempting to follow Spencer's lead and engage in a side issue, namely, the extent to which community is a postmodern ideal, whether Christians and postmoderns mean the same thing when they use the term, and whether the concept provides a bridge from the gospel to contemporary society. But let me bring the conversation back to Spencer's claim that my methodological proposal is ambiguous. I must say that I am quite flabbergasted that he would insinuate that I 'single out community as an overriding concern for postmoderns and then adjust [my] ecclesiology and doctrine of God to appeal to this'. I have repeatedly and clearly indicated that I see the postmodern context, with its rediscovery of such values as relationality and community, as providing an occasion for a renewed hearing for classical Christian perspectives, such as the triunity (i.e., the relationality or sociality) of God. Moreover, I would hope that my treatment of the doctrine of the trinity provides ample evidence that I begin ontologically with the primacy of the nature of the eternal God who is triune, even if in our epistemological engagement we must follow a route that moves both

'from above' and 'from below' in a kind of dialectical manner. In addition, my work bears witness to my belief that the nature and character of the triune God provide the transcendental basis and beginning point for how we ought to understand not only the church but also the ideal human society in every form. I would think that these aspects of my writings would allay any misconceptions that my program reduces God to a human construct.

The charge of ambiguity reaches a climax in the third section of the essay. Within the litany of criticisms that Spencer voices in these paragraphs, I find one recurring difficulty. Spencer appears to find my approach ambiguous, largely because he has not sufficiently understood a crucial aspect of my intention as an evangelical theologian. In keeping with the evangelical heritage, my goal is to retain the public character of theology. I attempt to do so in the contemporary context, however, without appeal to the foundationalist strategy that has tended to characterize theology since the Enlightenment but has become suspect with the advent of the postmodern turn. Spencer seems to assume that my desire to give theology a voice in the wider global conversation requires that I eventually retreat into some kind of foundationalism. What I am in fact proposing, however, runs diametrically counter to the Enlightenment model, borrowed by many of our evangelical predecessors, which looks for some universal, neutral standpoint from which we might adjudicate truth claims. My quest to provide just such a non-foundationalist public theology is what leads me to draw from a variety of voices – Pannenberg, Lindbeck, and I should add Karl Barth as well – which eclecticism Spencer finds so problematic.

To conclude: I would readily admit that Spencer is correct in declaring that my proposal contains a degree of ambiguity. Some of this ambiguity lies in the realm of nomenclature, such as whether I am proposing a non-foundationalist or a post-foundationalist theological method. Furthermore, as a relatively young theologian, I am still attempting to gain further insight on a variety of theological issues that retain a degree of provisionality (or call it 'ambiguity' if you will) in my writings to date. I am therefore grateful to readers who are eager to sharpen my thinking and expand my project by pointing out what they see as the areas of ambiguity in my thought. In this sense, I am indebted to my friend and colleague Archie Spencer for his ongoing attention to my work, even if I am not convinced that I have been as ambiguous in the matters that he raises as he claims.

At the same time, I must admit that by its very nature, theology will always be beset by a kind of ambiguity. Indeed, a proper ambiguity can be one of the theologian's greatest virtues. Ambiguity can become a virtue if it arises

out of and reflects a humility about what we as mere mortals can say about God and the mystery of salvation. Ambiguity likewise can become a virtue if it spurs both writer and reader to seek greater clarity as they engage together in the grand conversation that lies at the heart of the ongoing discipline we call 'theology'.

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