



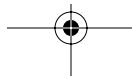
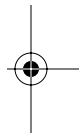
4

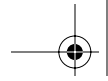
The Antifoundational Foundations of Postmodernism

When Charles Jencks suggested that “Modern Architecture died” in 1972 with the razing of foundations in St. Louis, he provided an apt analogy for postmodernism in general. For despite the fact that there are as many kinds of postmodernism as there are of Christianity, one attitude unifies most postmodernists: the desire to raze foundations. This, in fact, is what disturbs Christians about postmodernism. How can we welcome postmodern “antifoundationalism” while also singing with certitude “The Church’s one foundation / Is Jesus Christ her Lord”? Isn’t antifoundationalism antithetical to the truth of Christianity? Before I discuss specific postmodern theorists, I need to grapple with this very significant issue.

Fighting Foundationalism

More than “The Church’s One Foundation,” I grew up singing “Onward Christian Soldiers,” relishing the drumlike beat of “marching as to-oo war.” Even better was a song that allowed our entire Junior Church congregation to slide off our cold folding chairs in the Blue Room, the girls with accompanying squeaks of petticoated flesh on metal, in order to throw ourselves into full-body movements. We would swing our arms and rowdily stomp our feet while singing, “I may never march in the infantry,” and then “ride in the cavalry” while bobbing up and down with arms extended before us holding pretend reins. The bobbing stopped when we took aim with the next phrase, “shoot the artillery,” one eye closed as we held left arms in air like





rifles, right fingers pulling fantasy triggers next to our (incipient) biceps. After several more gestured phrases, we gleefully shouted the closing line of the refrain: “But I’m in the Lord’s army!”

We honed our battle techniques through Sunday school “sword drills” inspired by Ephesians 6:17: “Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” No one pointed out that the “sword” could not possibly be the Bible as we knew it; after all, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, there was no New Testament, which for us was the part that contained the truth of salvation. Instead, seated on the edge of our chairs with trusty “swords” perched in our laps, we held our breaths until the teacher yelled out a Bible reference: “Revelation 21:11.” Gulping air, we’d madly surf through the thin pages of our Bibles, and the first person to find the verse leaped (or squeaked) off the chair in order to exultantly read the passage aloud to the remaining lackluster soldiers.

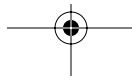
Early in my walk with Jesus, then, I developed a distinct sense that the Christian life was a combat zone and that I needed to be vigilant; Christians were surrounded by enemies far more subtle than those wanting to bomb me out from under my dining-room table. Today many Christians still feel as if they are in a combat zone, the enemy of their adult faith being post-modern attackers of foundations. What I have discovered since my sword drill days, however, is that foundationalists who wear philosophic boxing gloves to battle antifoundationalists are often shadow boxing: what they think they are fighting is in actuality foundationalism, only under a different guise.

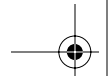
Defining Foundationalism

Some people define foundationalism as the existence of indubitable, universal axioms that all intellectually honest individuals—no matter when and where they live—can perceive apart from empirical proof. Derrida called this kind of foundationalism “a metaphysics of presence”: certain foundational truths are so fully apparent, so “present” to the consciousness of any perceiver, that they provide knowledge no thinking person would question.¹ This kind of truth does not need to be transmitted through scientific discovery, philosophic formulation or divine revelation. It is self-evident.

In contrast, others define foundationalism as the commitment to founda-

¹Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 49.





tional *beliefs* on which people build a worldview that explains reality. They *believe* their perceptions about the world to be universally true. Unlike the first group, these foundationalists make no claims about “invincible certainty.”²

Modernists appropriated the first definition, which can be traced back to pre-Christian philosophers such as Plato (427-347 B.C.) and his student Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). In fact, during the early years of Christianity, Platonists criticized the new religion because it emphasized belief in Christ rather than certitude in Ideal Forms that provide the foundation for all perception. In other words, Platonists considered Christians to be nonfoundationalists!

Traditional Christianity, then, at least during its first thirteen hundred years, operated by the second definition of foundationalism, articulated most famously by Augustine: “Understanding is the reward of faith. Seek therefore not to understand in order that you may believe, but to believe in order that you may understand.”³ Augustine, quite appropriately, seems to reflect a New Testament view of foundations, which repeatedly identifies Truth with Jesus Christ, a person to believe rather than an Idea obvious to all rational people.

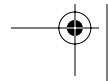
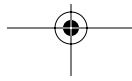
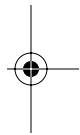
With the demise of medieval assumptions about the centrality of belief, however, early modern philosophers reasserted ancient pagan certainty about autonomous reason. Aristotle’s assumption that “mental experiences . . . are the same for all”⁴ was echoed not only in Descartes’s *cogito*, which eliminated possibilities of doubt, but also in Kant’s coin-machine mind, which posited uniform categories of perception for all.

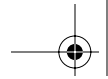
The edifice of Enlightenment truth was thus constructed on a foundation of empirical stones mortared together with reason. Though its seventeenth-century architects kept Christ as a cornerstone, builders in the eighteenth century spread the mortar of reason over the cornerstone, covering Jesus up. Remodelers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries chipped away at the cornerstone, eventually prying Christ out of the foundation altogether. For

²Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: 2003), p. 237. Greer aligns Derrida’s “metaphysics of presence” with foundationalism as I do. Philosophers tend to call the first kind of foundationalism “strong” or “classical” and the second “soft” or “modest.” See John R. Franke, “The Nature of Theology: Culture, Language and Truth,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 210.

³Quoted in Diané Collinson, *Fifty Major Philosophers: A Reference Guide* (New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 28.

⁴From *De interpretatione*, quoted in Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism*, p. 237.





them, Jesus was not a solid stone because his miracles defy reason and his claims cannot be empirically proved. By the end of the twentieth century, however, postmodern building inspectors starting digging away at the mortar of reason, creating a space to replace the stone which the builders had rejected (Mark 12:10).

Defining Antifoundationalism

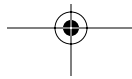
Postmodern antifoundationalists are really anti, or against, *modernist* foundationalism; they are against the idea that indubitable truth can be objectively perceived by reason alone. For them, as for Augustine, truth is built on foundational beliefs—beliefs that precede any kind of thought. Foundations, they readily admit, are necessary to build any kind of knowledge. But this is different from modernist foundationalism. Indeed, Stanley Fish, one of the most famous antifoundationalists of our time, acknowledges that if foundationalism is defined as “holding some foundational beliefs,” then all humans are foundationalists.⁵

The postmodern Fish becomes even more like the premodern Augustine when he attests that the only means to “absolute certainty” is through “revelation (something I [Fish] do not rule out but have not yet experienced).”⁶ Enlightenment foundationalists, of course, disdain the idea of revelation, deeming it superfluous (not to mention superstitious), since for them unaided reason can access truth on its own. Postmodern antifoundationalism, in contrast, allows for revelation as a “foundational belief” for people of faith.

It is therefore ironic that during the reign of modernism, many Christians moved into the Enlightenment house, aligning foundational truth not with a personal God, manifest in Christ and revealed through the Scriptures, but with impersonal self-evident universals. A good number of Christians still reside there, proudly mounting their cornerstone on a wall, hiding under the dining-room table when postmodernists arrive with eviction notices. Such Christians seem to be modernists as much as Christians, sometimes throwing as much energy into defending the modernist foundation as they spend proclaiming the love of Christ.

⁵J. Judd Owen, *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 146.

⁶Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 113.





In my experience, this Enlightenment house has many mansions, or apartments,⁷ occupied by at least five different kinds of modernist Christians who sometimes pound on the walls when they become incensed by the noise coming from their Christian neighbors.

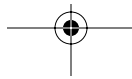
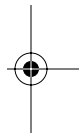
In Modernist Mansion #1: Demythologizers

In one apartment are members of many mainline churches that in the early to mid twentieth century chose to decorate their residences with the anti-supernatural assumptions developed during the Enlightenment. Influenced by the higher criticism of the nineteenth century, these modernist Christians “demythologize” their Scriptures, as when theologian Rudolf Bultmann proclaimed in 1941, “We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.”⁸ Because it is not “modern” to believe in a literal resurrection, which defies both reason and scientific verifiability, these modernist Christians assert a figurative resurrection: Christ is resurrected in those followers who practice his teachings. When they say that Christ was God incarnate, they mean that the man Jesus incarnated the unfallen characteristics that God intended for all human beings: characteristics endorsed by Enlightenment thinkers, such as liberty, equality and fraternity.

These modernist Christians helped motivate my interest in postmodernism, for though I admired their ethical commitment to resurrect Jesus in their actions, often recognizing my own inadequacy in comparison, I still wanted to believe in a literal, historical resurrection—for two reasons. First, if Jesus didn’t miraculously arise from his tomb, Christianity became, for me, simply one attractive ethical system among many competitors. Second, since there is no way anyone can *prove* that the resurrection did or *did not* occur (the desire for proof itself reflecting a modernist mindset), all I can do is take on faith the Gospels, trusting that the Holy Spirit guided the church fathers who canonized them and interpreted them through their creeds. Belief in a literal resurrection—as opposed to the metaphoric or “poetic” rendition of demythologizers—was foundational to Christianity very early on. To identify my-

⁷See John 14:2 KJV. To this day in England, the King James word *mansions* sometimes means “apartments.”

⁸Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation,” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 4.





self as a Christian, then, is to identify with a cornerstone assumption held by myriad Christians for over two millennia.

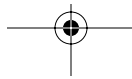
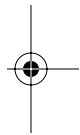
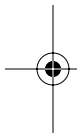
Of course, modernist Christians in Mansion #1 might legitimately protest that the church also believed, and defended, some pretty wacky ideas for nearly that long—like Ptolemy’s view of the heavens, in which the earth was at the center of the universe. This protest is modernist because it trumps something that is not empirically verifiable—Christ’s divine nature and miraculous resurrection—with science. However, the ancient creeds do not make scientific claims. They present a statement of belief formulated, sometimes amid contentious debate, by followers of Christ attempting to come up with the shared foundations of their faith.

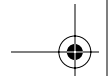
I therefore rejoiced when postmodernism started undermining modernist foundations, not only by dissolving the antsupernatural mortar of reason holding together the “evidence” of science but also by implying that *all* worldviews are based on unprovable axioms. Thanks to postmodernism, as I have already discussed, Christians were invited to once again sit at the intellectual table (rather than under it). Of course, modernist scholars resent—sometimes viciously—this invitation, and many postmodernists feel like withdrawing the invitation, largely due to Christians in the next apartment of the modernist house.

In Modernist Mansion #2: Fundamentalists

While Christian demythologizers destabilize the architecture of Christianity by cutting extra doors to allow easier access for modernists, fundamentalists guard their one and only door, allowing only those who have the right password to come inside. People who do not use the correct phrasing—such as “I have a personal relationship with Jesus” (even though that phrase appears nowhere in Scripture)—or who cannot identify a specific moment when they were “born again” are left out in the cold (or perhaps I should say “in the heat”).

I thoroughly understand this position, having served for many years as a vigilant door monitor myself. After all, in Sunday school I gleefully sang “One door and only one, and yet its sides are two; I’m on the inside, on which side are you?”—a song based on Christ’s words “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9 kjv). Only now do I realize that my focus was more on the password than on the door, placing the power of salvation on human





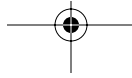
language rather than the work of Christ. Furthermore, I totally overlooked a later verse that was part of Christ's same parable: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice" (John 10:16). This statement can be interpreted a number of different ways, but it clearly implies that the "inside" and "outside" of Christ's fold are not as clear-cut as "password" thinking implies.

I held onto password Christianity until I started studying the Anglo-Catholic writer Dorothy L. Sayers, whose BBC radio plays about the life of Jesus brought many people into the fold in the 1940s. Admiring her well-educated defense of Christian orthodoxy, I was shocked when I read her repeated assertions that she never had a "conversion experience"; how could she get inside without the right password? Furthermore, she, like her friend C. S. Lewis, enjoyed smoking and drinking—behaviors not allowed in my Christian mansion. Nevertheless, my admiration of Sayers and Lewis—who were disdained by fundamentalists and modernists alike—won out, and I began to wonder whether fundamentalist Christians borrowed the design of their mansion door from modernists.

Indeed, like the modernists I encountered in grad school (see chapter one), many fundamentalists consider it impossible to be a Christian and an intellectual simultaneously. The big difference, of course, is that Enlightenment intellectuals say "Christian" with a sneer of disdain, whereas fundamentalist Christians often say "intellectual" with a sneer of defiance. During the first half of the twentieth century, scientific modernists and fundamentalist Christians seemed to stand on opposite sides of the same door. But the door wasn't Christ; it was logical positivism, which asserted that only scientifically verifiable statements can be considered "true." Seeming to agree with modernists that only science is worthy of reasoned assent, fundamentalists argued (and many still do) for the scientific accuracy of the Bible. They turned Scripture into a collection of positivistic statements and went to incredible lengths to explain away textual discrepancies, as when Harold Lindsell, in the 1970s, worked to reconcile the fact that "Paul in I Corinthians reports that '23,000 fell in a single day' while the account in Numbers 25:9 says '24,000.'"⁹

Even to this day, rather than simply *believing* the Bible to be the Word of God, fundamentalists invoke science to "prove" the Bible's truth. When, for example, they work to find "empirical evidence" that a dyspeptic whale

⁹Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 167.





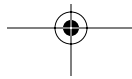
could indeed burp up an undigested Jonah,¹⁰ fundamentalists unwittingly imply that empiricism has a greater truth claim than Scripture. And their commitment to a literal six-day creation—to prove the Bible’s scientific accuracy—has motivated numerous expeditions to find Noah’s Ark. Mimicking Charles Darwin, these raiders of the lost ark are in search of scientific data to explain fossil evidence; however, while the modernist Darwin wanted to prove godless natural processes deposited the fossils, these modernist Christians want to prove that the Genesis flood deposited the fossils. They stand on opposite sides of the same door.

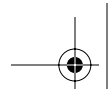
Ironically, then, when Christians argue for the scientific accuracy of the Bible they are conceding that science has ultimate ownership of the truth; they are signing their house of faith over to a modernist landlord. Before the development of modernism, Christians did not feel the need to defend the Bible as though it were a scientifically formulated life-saving document, for they assumed that it is Christ who saves us, not the Bible. This is not to say that medieval Christians did not develop their own passwords. Fallen human nature repeatedly wants to substitute human language and behavior for Christ. It is also not to say that fundamentalists are deficient Christians. Like the demythologizers in *Mansion #1*, many put me to shame with their dedication to following Christ. My criticism is directed, instead, to the notion of an “inerrant” Bible.

It is no coincidence that the concept of biblical “inerrancy” developed in nineteenth-century England almost simultaneously with Darwin’s idea of natural selection: both were influenced by Enlightenment empiricism. Ironically, then, when fundamentalists think they are protecting Christianity by arguing that the Bible contains no scientific or historical inaccuracies, they assert a view of Scripture that is more modernist than traditional. They show a commitment to the canons of scientism more than to orthodox faith. Fundamentalists today might be shocked to discover that Christians believed in the literal death and resurrection of Christ for nineteen hundred years without having to insist on biblical inerrancy. The concept of an inerrant Bible did not appear until the 1820s, and, like evolution, it did not become widespread for at least a century.¹¹

¹⁰For an overview of reputed evidence for the scientific accuracy of the book of Jonah, see Edward B. Davis, “A Whale of a Tale: Fundamentalist Fish Stories,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 43 (December 1991): 224-37.

¹¹For a brief history of biblical inerrancy, see D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 81-91.





In Modernist Mansion #3: Cultural Conservatives

In the third apartment of modernist Christianity are those who have resisted not only the antisupernatural assumptions of the demythologizers but also the anti-intellectual impulses of fundamentalism. I admire them greatly; they are well educated and articulate, their mansion walls lined with the “great books” of the Western canon. But I worry when some begin complaining that, due to postmodern “multiculturalism,” students no longer know the “classics.”

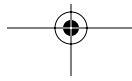
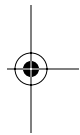
As a professor of English literature, I value the “classics” myself, regarding *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (1872), *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (1847) and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (1813) to be far superior in artistry and insight to most bestsellers of our day. In fact, I feel tremendous satisfaction quoting the definition of “bestsellers” in *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*: “Seldom of great literary significance, such works are often ephemeral and dependent upon temporary tastes and interests.”¹²

Nevertheless, postmodernism has made me aware that “literary significance” is itself contingent upon historical contexts. Along with their peers, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis thought it a waste of time to teach Shakespeare, let alone Austen, Brontë and Eliot. After all, they asserted, students should be able to read these “easy” works on their own. Education instead should focus on Greek and Latin so that students can read the “real” classics: Homer and Virgil, Sophocles and Terence (despite all the naughty bits). Ironically, even the heroic parts of Homer’s *Odyssey* are often inimical to Christian orthodoxy.¹³ Thus, not only do pagan “classics” undercut Christian perspectives, but many of the so-called classics considered necessary today for a quality school curriculum were once dismissed by an earlier generation as superfluous.

Furthermore, when Christians extol with evangelistic fervor the “great books” advocates E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom, I get a bit uncomfortable, for these writers perpetuate the Modernist sanctification of art. All too often, those who preach the educational necessity of the “classics” do so assuming the demise of Christianity. For them, only the humanities can save humanity.

¹²James E. Hart, ed., *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 75.

¹³Daniel Ritchie, author of *Reconstructing Literature in an Ideological Age: A Biblical Poetics and Literary Studies from Milton to Burke* (Eerdmans 1996), makes this point during an interview on *Mars Hill Audio Journal* 69 (July/August 2004).





George Sampson, for example, wrote in his *English for the English*, “What the teacher has to consider is not the minds he can measure but the souls he can save.” Like other Modernists, Sampson believed that the study of English literature “is not a routine but a religion. . . . It is almost sacramental.”¹⁴ Cul-cha replaces Christ as cornerstone for many advocates of the “classics.”

If anything, Christians should be advocates of “multiculturalism,” wanting to understand how and why people of other cultures think and act the way they do. If God loved the whole world enough to send Christ to save it, Christians should want to immerse themselves in contemporary literature in order to understand how the good news is relevant to all people. Furthermore, U.S. Christians should be especially hesitant to proclaim the superiority of Western culture since “Christianity is rapidly becoming a non-Western religion, with Evangelical Protestants comprising only about 3-4% of the world population of Christians.”¹⁵

In Modernist Mansion #4: Two Kinds of Objectivists

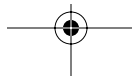
The last mansion in the Enlightenment edifice is occupied by individuals much to be respected: Christian academics who, having been trained by modernists in grad school, can often hold their own with the best minds in their discipline. The scholars in this mansion take two forms:

- * those who clothe their Christianity with modernist designs
- * those who alternate between modernist and Christian styles, keeping their clothing in separate closets

I have encountered this second kind of Christian scholar most often in the sciences. Drilled by empiricist captains, they follow orders to be “totally objective”—which usually translates to the idea that Christianity is irrelevant, if not inimical, to their discipline. Their faith, like their Sunday suit, is therefore closeted until they take off their uniform of scientific inquiry. Though many of these scholars teach at secular institutions where they are discouraged from ever wearing Christianity on their sleeve, I had my first contact with separate-wardrobe-Christians on a Christian college campus: in the 1970s I overheard a psychology professor state, “I’m a behaviorist on weekdays and a Christian

¹⁴Quoted in Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 100-101.

¹⁵Joseph Huffman, “Faith, Reason and the Text: The Return of the Middle Ages in Postmodern Scholarship,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 29 (1999): 298 n. 51.





on the weekends.” Even in 2005, while discussing the “intelligent design” court case that was taking place ten minutes from my house, I overheard a Christian science teacher from a local high school say that scientists are “pure” in their analysis of evolution while nonscientific Christians are “prejudiced” against it. Bringing Christianity into a discussion of science was, to her, about as appropriate as wearing a football helmet at the opera.

Modernist scholars of the other kind, rather than divorcing their intellectual work from their Christianity, employ modernist paradigms to argue for the legitimacy of Christianity. I highly value their desire to make Christianity intellectually tenable, but sometimes it seems as if they’re trying to dress Jesus in a top hat and spats while turning the truth of Christ into the well-dressed propositions of modernist fashion. Some of these Christians can be so steeped in Enlightenment paradigms that rather than “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” their refrain sounds like “The Church’s one foundation is the objectivity of truth.” For them, an Enlightenment paradigm props up the cornerstone of Christ.

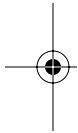
When Christians think like this, argues philosopher James K. A. Smith, “the human person is *reduced* to a (primarily or essentially) rational animal, and truth is reduced to an affair of reason”—a reductionism that is “unbiblical.”¹⁶ Even Christian philosophers wary of postmodernism recognize the problem with such modernist Christianity. As theologian Kevin Vanhoozer argues, “The truth of Christianity is not like the universal truth of reason. The cradle of Christian faith is a story rather than a system.”¹⁷

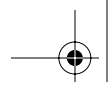
Truth of the Christian Story

The story with which we identify ourselves, of course, is presented in the

¹⁶James K. A. Smith, “Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism? A Response to the ‘Biola School,’” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 219. Smith parallels this kind of thinking with “Christian philosophy that is devoted to analytic philosophy, a revised foundationalist epistemology, a classical evidentialist apologetics . . . and a biblicist notion of propositional revelation” (p. 226). For other Christian critiques of the “objectivity of truth,” see Philip D. Kenneson, “There’s No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), and Rodney Clapp, “How Firm a Foundation: Can Evangelicals Be Nonfoundationalists?” in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 81-92.

¹⁷Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Pilgrim’s Digress: Christian Thinking on and About the Post/Modern Way,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron B. Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 84.





Bible. And according to that story, Jesus did not identify truth with a proposition to be believed but with a person—himself—to be trusted: “I am the way, and the *truth*, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Reinforcing these statements, Paul says of Christ, “For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as *truth* is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21), and John refers to “the *truth* that abides in us and will be with us forever” (2 John 2).

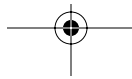
Just as the performance of the embodied Christ is the truth of our salvation, our performance in response confirms that truth. Jesus tells his disciples, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the *truth*, and the *truth* will make you free” (John 8:31-32). The letters of St. John reiterate the importance not of “knowing” the truth but of “walking in the truth” (2 John 4; 3 John 3-4): “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true” (1 John 1:6); and “Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist” (1 John 2:4). Truth is something we *do* in loving response to the Truth Incarnate.

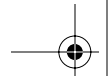
The performance of the body is so foundational to Christian belief that Paul made it a point to emphasize the resurrection of believers’ bodies (see 1 Corinthians 15). He did so in order to argue against an antibody philosophy that had infiltrated the church. Influenced by Plato, this pagan philosophy (which developed into Gnosticism by the second century) regarded the body as a mere prison of the mind or soul.

Gnostic Foundationalism

Despite Paul’s arguments against proto-Gnostic tendencies in the early church, the historic map of Christianity is crisscrossed with repeated detours into Gnostic thought. The most dismal, dead-end detour developed during the patristic period, when Christian ascetics would torture their bodies—wearing prickly hairshirts, whipping their backs, sometimes even following the example of Origen (185?-254?) by castrating themselves—in an attempt to defy their physical impulses.

Contemptuous of such Christian practices, modernists nevertheless developed their own brand of Gnosticism when they established that the mind could reach disinterested truth totally apart from the body. This seems to be Descartes’s point in his *cogito*, where he implies what I’ve





added in parentheses: “(I can transcend the positionality of my body when) I think, therefore I am.”

When Christians like Descartes started traveling the modernist road, they gassed up on an unleaded form of Gnosticism to drive their belief: a belief that was as much about the godlike power of the mind as it was about the truth of Christ. As Susan Bordo notes about Descartes, “The godly intellect is on the way to becoming the true deity of the modern era.” Even to this day, argues famous literary critic Harold Bloom, religion in the United States—from the Southern Baptists to the Mormons—is fueled by Gnosticism.¹⁸

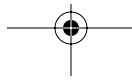
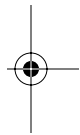
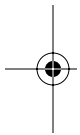
St. Paul, in contrast, so believes in the importance of the body that he exhorts Christians to be in fellowship with other bodies, and he compares the body of the church with parts of the human body:

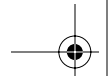
Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:14-26)

In this passage, which engages seven more verses than I quoted, Paul gives the most extended metaphor in all his writings, perhaps because he seeks to establish two important concepts:

1. Rather than becoming autonomous believers, Christians are to act as interdependent performers, all participating in the body of Christ.

¹⁸Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 81; Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).





2. Rather than submitting to the Gnostic privileging of soul and mind over body, Christians are to recognize the importance of all parts of the body, both literal and figurative.

Paul would be quite dismayed at the contamination of Christianity by the Gnosticism of modernism, which severed the mind from the body to such an extent that the head—the organ of reason—proclaimed to the feet, “I don’t need you!”

Christian Nonfoundationalism

The efficacy of reason itself is a matter of belief. And postmodernists were not the first to recognize this. In 1943 Sayers explained to a non-Christian correspondent,

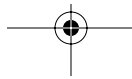
One act of faith must, indeed, be made before one can accept Christianity: one must be prepared to believe that the universe is rational, and that (consequently) human reason is valid so far as it goes. But that is an act of faith which we have to make in order to think about anything at all. . . . Admittedly, we cannot prove that the universe is rational; for the only instrument by which we can prove anything is reason, and we have to assume the rationality of things before we can trust or use our reason.¹⁹

Or, as stated by Anselm over eight centuries earlier, *credo ut intelligam*: I believe in order to understand. To deny that belief precedes knowledge is to duplicate the assumptions of modernists, who assume belief to be a deficient mode of understanding.

In 1976, Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff explicitly challenged modernist foundationalism in a remarkable little book he called *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, a title that reversed the emphasis of Kant’s famous work *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone*. Indicting Christians who have appropriated modernist foundations in their desire for “indubitable” truth, Wolterstorff argues that all truth, including scientific truth, is built on assumptions that must be taken on faith:

Foundationalism is a normative theory. And though I shall argue that no one who has professed to be a foundationalist has ever followed the norm to which he subscribes, yet overall the acceptance of foundationalism by Western scholars has profoundly affected their theorizing. In the case of those scholars

¹⁹The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, vol. 2, 1937 to 1943: From Novelist to Playwright, ed. Barbara Reynolds (New York: St. Martin’s, 1997), p. 401.





who were Christians, its acceptance has repeatedly served to confuse and intimidate them in their theorizing. Only if the sting of foundationalism is plucked will the infection subside.

As a plucky plucker of the foundationalist sting, Wolterstorff, like St. George battling the dragon, takes action in the name of Christ. Rallying Christian scholars to his aid, he seeks to conquer the dragon of modernism that continues to attack the foundations of a house not made with hands. Rather than capitulate to scientism, Wolterstorff argues that “the religious beliefs of the Christian scholar ought to function as control beliefs within his devising and weighing of theories.”²⁰

Following this charge, numerous Christian intellectuals have celebrated the subversion of modernist foundationalism by postmodern thinkers.²¹ As Stanley Grenz noted in 2000, “Scholars today have embarked on a quest to uncover a nonfoundationalist, or, as some prefer, a postfoundationalist approach. Viewed from this perspective, we might say that the intellectual world lying ‘after modernity’ is a realm ‘beyond foundationalism.’”²² John Franke provides a helpful explanation of “beyond foundationalism”:

If we must speak of “foundations” for the Christian faith and its theological enterprise, then we must speak only of the triune God who is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world, albeit always in accordance with the normative witness to divine self-disclosure contained in scripture. Put another way, nonfoundationalist theology means the end of foundationalism but not “foundations.”²³

Beyond Foundationalism: Radical Orthodoxy

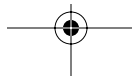
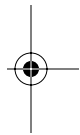
In the 1990s, a group of Christian scholars in England began conceptualizing

²⁰Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 34, 70.

²¹A notable movement in this regard is the “postliberal narrative theology” generated by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck. Evangelicals have written so much about Frei and Lindbeck that I do not discuss them in this book. Instead, I would refer readers to two books cited above: Robert Greer’s *Mapping Postmodernism*, and *The Nature of Confession* edited by Phillips and Okholm. For other significant Christian engagements with nonfoundationalism, see Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

²²Based on a paper Grenz delivered in 2000, these words appear in Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 28-29.

²³Franke, “Nature of Theology,” p. 118.





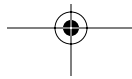
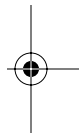
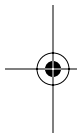
what they named Radical Orthodoxy: a return to orthodox Christianity before it was tainted by modernist foundationalism. For “radically orthodox” scholars, the “modern” era began in the thirteenth century when John Duns Scotus (1265?-1308) “attempted to argue for knowledge of God” apart from revelation and thus established perceived truth as a more solid foundation than dogma. This kind of foundationalism, based on reason, “elevated a neutral account of being above the distinction between the Creator and his creatures.”²⁴ Duns Scotus thus led the way for human reason to supersede divine revelation in the pursuit of truth. As a result, rather than humbly submitting to a God who transcends all human knowledge, early modern foundationalists, as we have seen, sanctified the human mind in the assumption that reason can reach indubitable, objective, universal truth on its own.

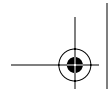
Taking a stand against such modernist autonomy, Radical Orthodoxy emphasizes, as did St. Paul, that Christians are all “members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19-20). The foundation is not indubitable propositional truth but a community of believers with whom Christians should identify: “God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15 NIV). Depending on how you diagram the grammar of this verse, the foundation of truth is either God or the church—an appropriate ambiguity, since we come to know God through participation with other believers.

The word *participation*, in fact, is key to Radical Orthodoxy. First and foremost, Radical Orthodoxy asserts that all of creation participates with God, for everything created is dependent on its Creator. Conversely, belief in autonomous reason—or modernist foundationalism—is fundamentally “nihilistic,” as is any ideology that severs dependence on God. Because all that is within creation—including human creations—participates “in the primal gift of the Creator,”²⁵ Christians are called to value the body and how it participates in God’s creation, manifesting this value through their worship: not only in liturgy, sacrament and art but also by embodying Christ to others. However, for the radically orthodox, the truth in which we participate is not self-evident; it has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit working through

²⁴Phillip Blond, “Perception: From Modern Painting to the Vision in Christ,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 233.

²⁵James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), p. 67.





the “household of God.” We therefore walk by faith in the truth of revelation, rather than in sight of indubitable foundations.

Though often called a “postmodern theology,” Radical Orthodoxy is an attempt to reinstate the theology of significant premodern Christian thinkers without repudiating the contributions of the Reformation or abandoning the important political, social and technical advances of the Enlightenment.²⁶ Catherine Pickstock, for example, shows how the great Christian philosopher Aquinas (1225-1274), though he encouraged the use of human reason, nevertheless recognized “the situatedness of our manner of knowing”: “For Aquinas truth is not at all a matter of detached abstraction, but rather of the specific entry into our minds of certain contingent features and events.”²⁷ In other words, Aquinas recognized that we interpret reality according to how we are placed in it: the positionality of our body. We should not be surprised, then, that postmodern perceptions sometimes echo premodernism, the time when Christianity had cultural dominance in Europe.

Paralleling the Premodern with the Postmodern

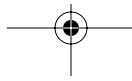
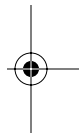
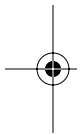
A great way to think of the parallel between postmodernism and premodernism was given to me by medieval scholar Joseph Huffman in an essay called “Faith, Reason and the Text: The Return of the Middle Ages in Postmodern Scholarship.” Among his many insights, Huffman discusses the transformation of the phrase *bona fide*.²⁸ Most of us today know the term by its modernist use: “that’s a bona fide Picasso painting,” or “that’s a bona fide zit on your nose.” Something “bona fide” has been verified by empirical evidence.

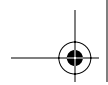
Ironically, *bona fide* is a Latin term that actually means “in good faith” (both words were pronounced with two syllables: bo'-na fi'-de). For premodern Christians, who usually wrote in Latin, something was true if it was

²⁶Radical Orthodoxy is also critical of postmodernism—primarily when it perpetuates modernist paradigms. For instance, John Milbank thinks that postmodernism is as Gnostic as modernism because both sever material realities from dependence on the transcendent. See *ibid.*, p. 192.

²⁷Catherine Pickstock, “Radical Orthodoxy and the Mediation of Time,” in *Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry*, ed. Laurence Paul Hemming (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2000), p. 67.

²⁸Huffman, “Faith, Reason and the Text,” p. 290. Huffman’s essay focuses on attitudes toward texts. For the modernist, a text was bona fide if authentic authorship could be verified; for the premodernist, a text was bona fide if the content accorded with traditional Christian truth, even if the text was a forgery of a famous church father.





bo-na fi-de: if it reflected the orthodox doctrines of Christianity. Foundations, then, were considered genuine not due to the evidence of reason or empirical data but through reasoned identification with the good faith of the Christian community. The truth of Christ was bona fide.

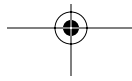
By the eighteenth century, however, *bona fide* had been reduced to simply mean “genuine,” and by the twentieth century such genuineness was aligned with empirical verifiability. This etymology shows that Aquinas was right: knowledge of the meaning of *bona fide* is affected by the contingent features and events of our culture, such that most twenty-first-century Christians have replaced the Christian meaning of *bona fide* with the modernist redefinition. Just as the spoken phrase has been reduced from four syllables to three, so also the meaning has been reduced to what can be empirically proven.

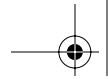
Bona Fide Postmodernism: Neopragmatism

Like premodern Christians, postmodern “communitarians” identify foundational truth with the bo-na fi-de of a believing community. The two most famous—also known as postmodern “neopragmatists”—are Stanley Fish, quoted above, and Richard Rorty. Fish and Rorty assert that a community must stand by its bona fide truth, believing it passionately. The difference between them might be explained with the language Robert Putnam employs in his book *Bowling Alone*.²⁹ Putnam identifies two kinds of communities: bridging and bonding. In Putnam’s terms, Fish emphasizes the importance of community *bonding*, where members of a group cling to their distinctions from the rest of culture, feeling separate from it as they proclaim the truth of their particular position. In contrast, Rorty advocates communities that maintain their beliefs while seeking to build *bridges* with groups that think differently, finding language that can emphasize the commonalities among them.

Problems with the postmodern bridging and bonding of Rorty and Fish will be addressed in chapter seven. For now, I’d like to suggest that a truly vibrant Christianity reflects both impulses, communities bonding together for the purpose of mutual edification and growth in order to more effectively build bridges that transport grace to those outside “the household of God.”

²⁹Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).





Biblical Foundations

I hope you are convinced by now that foundationalism is tricky business. For, in many people’s minds, it is nothing other than the philosophical base for the house of modernism: a tacit trust in the “objectivity of truth”—in contradistinction to the backward “superstitions” of faith. Nevertheless, we can understand its attractions, as the word *foundation* evokes the image of rock-solid stasis. That’s why we like the word; we want our truth to stay put.

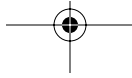
The New Testament, however, aligns the foundation of Christianity with dynamism, not stasis. Just think of Jesus’ parable about the wise and foolish builders:

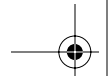
Why do you call me “Lord, Lord,” and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. (Luke 6:46-49)

Obviously, someone who calls Jesus “Lord, Lord” believes in him—or at least acknowledges his preeminence. However, according to Jesus, the successful foundation is not simply belief or knowledge; the solid foundation is action.

Paul confirms Jesus’ activist foundations in his letters to Timothy. He directs his “loyal child in the faith” how to exhort rich Christians: “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good *foundation* for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life” (1 Timothy 6:18-19). And later Paul writes, “God’s firm *foundation* stands, bearing this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness’” (2 Timothy 2:19). The foundation is sealed not by human knowledge but by God’s knowledge; it stands firm not simply through confession of belief but in the actions that follow.³⁰ Hence, when the New Testament repeatedly

³⁰John confirms Paul’s perception: “Whoever says, ‘I have come to know him,’ but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist” (1 John 2:4).





aligns foundations with the performing body, it implies that foundations move.

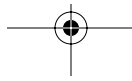
Moving Foundations

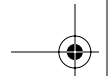
The idea of moving foundations probably sounds oxymoronic, if not moronic, to anyone who hasn't lived in California. I, however, have experienced several dramatic California earthquakes, including one that turned a hundred-year-old stone grotto on my parents' property into a pile of rubble. I am aware, therefore, that foundations for newer skyscrapers in San Francisco and Los Angeles are placed on rollers, enabling them, during earthquakes, to roll with the movement of the earth rather than crack apart. Their foundations hold strong precisely *because* they move.

Sometimes Christians get so rigidly committed to a certain idea of "truth" as foundational that when the earth, or at least culture, moves under them their faith develops huge cracks—as happened to those Christians endorsing geocentricism. Galileo, as is well known, was tried by church officials because of his "unbiblical" assertion that the earth moved around the sun. Many of his judges used the Bible to support the traditional view they had inherited from the ancients: the sun, moon and stars all move around the earth. However, as their biblical geocentricism became more and more problematic, church teaching as a legitimate foundation for truth was called into question. The foundation cracked when it was discovered that the earth does indeed move.

The same is happening today with Christians who are "young earth" creationists.³¹ Though they assume that they are standing firm for their faith with a rock-solid foundation, they don't realize that the Christian house built on such a foundation has such huge cracks in it that no one believing even the most conservative scientific estimates for the world's age would dare to move in. Thus, in the minds of many intelligent design scholars, rather than preserving Christianity, "young earth" creationists are making it intellectually unten(ant)able. Like skyscrapers in California, the house of Christian faith as expressed in the Apostles' Creed will stand

³¹I am not indicting the "intelligent design" movement, even though "young earth" creationists usually identify with it. Two of the most intelligent Christian philosophers I have met endorse a form of "intelligent design." Both, however, argue that the earth is far older than "young earth" creationists allow. For a good overview of intelligent design, see William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999).





longer if Christians allow theories about the earth's age to move.

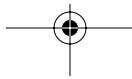
But how far can we allow foundations to move without doing disservice to our faith? Once again, think of San Francisco skyscrapers. Though they are on rollers, this doesn't mean that an earthquake will send a building located on Union Square over to Golden Gate Park several miles away, negotiating streets and sidewalks like a kid on his skateboard. The pit in which the movable foundation stands provides limits.

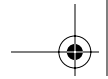
I would argue that the foundation of Christianity stands in a four-sided pit dug into a bedrock of belief. One side that limits extreme movement is lined with the Bible; another side is lined with church tradition; the third side is a wall of reason; and personal experience (which includes cultural situatedness) makes up the fourth wall.³² With a movable foundation placed within these four walls, Christianity can withstand cultural earthquakes that present us with new ways of thinking, as when astronomers suggested that the earth orbits around the sun, or biologists suggest that homosexuality may be rooted in prenatal development more than personal choice. Because our foundation is placed on rollers of faith, it can move as we employ reason to assess empirical data in the light of biblical teaching and traditional dogma. But this also means that we need to assess our understanding of the Bible and church tradition by reasoned assessment of science and culture: to keep our foundation intact by allowing it to move.³³

Significantly, the Bible warns against *unmoving* foundations. In the Gospels we are told that many people had such rigid foundations that they failed to see the Incarnate Truth when he walked and talked among them. In contrast, Christ moved foundations when he healed on the sabbath and rose from the dead. In the early apostolic period Peter moved foundations when he extended Christianity to Gentiles. In 325 the Council at Nicaea moved foundations when it established, with the help of the Roman emperor, that Jesus was "begotten, not made." In 1098 Anselm moved foundations when he redefined atonement as a payment made to God rather than

³²Many readers will recognize in my four walls an echo of the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," a term Albert Outler coined in the 1960s to describe how Methodist preacher John Wesley (1703-1791) approached theological issues.

³³In the words of theologian/scientist Alister McGrath, "As any serious historian of Christian thought knows, Christianity is committed to a constant review of its ideas in the light of their moorings in scripture and tradition, always asking whether any contemporary interpretations of a doctrine is adequate or acceptable." See *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 13.





as a ransom required by the devil.³⁴ In 1517 Luther moved foundations when he posted ninety-five theses about Christianity on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. In 1882 Elizabeth Cady Stanton moved foundations when she argued, with the aid of the Bible, that Christians should support women's suffrage.³⁵

Christians today, then, can sing with confidence "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord," knowing that they join myriad others throughout the last two millennia to confirm that just as our One God is three, so our One Foundation is plural: the body of Christ kept alive in numerous bodies of believers, whose faith is bona fide *because* it moves.



³⁴For a brief but illuminating history of changes in the doctrine of the atonement, see J. Denny Weaver, "Violence in Christian Theology," *CrossCurrents* 51 (Summer 2001): 151-53.

³⁵This may explain why the famous postmodernist Jacques Derrida stated that "Christianity is the most plastic, the most open, religion, the most prepared, the best prepared, to face unpredictable transformations." See "Epoché and Faith: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 33.

